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The Smallest Bones

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is made up of five short stories which examine love in relationships under stress, dealing with people who succeed and fail at connecting with each other, and how that affects individual identities. Often third parties, such as family or other love interests or the past, further complicate the intimacy of the relationships. The men and women within these stories have difficulty communicating with each other and with themselves. Some of the stories employ multiple points of view, gesturing at personal alienation and the interdependent nature of the conflicts. All of them are set in or close to urban spaces, from Edmonton to nameless Canadian cities to a Slavonian city in Croatia. The stories end in uneasy truces, reconciliation, or further breaking apart, but they all imply that hope and despair are in flux beyond the parameters of the narrative.

for J.O.

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The Russians are Coming

My wife had her arm out the window trying to grab at things as I lazed the car around the narrow, snaking country road. We were flanked by a dense mob of elms on either side, so giant and full of gold they'd begun to rain down leaves like flames on the gravel, like they wanted to reclaim the man-made gouge between them. Out the window my wife's hand was upturned expectantly, her eyes locked in a squint, her trademark of determination, surveying the forest. I accelerated and looked ahead to the next curve as the loose pages of warranties and sales figures blew around in the trash- and product-laden back seat. There were two disassembled vacuums back there, and salesman knives sharp enough to skin something wild. Civilization delivered on the edge of a blade. But I had recently taken a real job, advertising, perfect for an optimist or a smooth talker. Well, I was neither. But it seemed my lot to make the consumer my target. It was the early nineties and I wasn't exactly consistent as a career man, nor as a husband.

"Don't you realize," I said, "those fingers, then hand then arm then all the rest, are about to be swallowed whole by the ever-encroaching nature out there?"

She didn't laugh, blink, or show any sign of registering a word. I let my foot stay heavy on the gas. After nearly fifteen years of holy matrimony, why does it take an undesired trip into the country to perform an equally undesired reunion with an old friend on an otherwise free and empty Saturday afternoon in October to realize that your wife doesn't think you are at all funny or even amusing and come to think of it had she ever.

"I don't remember it being so gorgeous here. Can't you slow down?" she said. "If you'd ease up maybe I could catch one."

"Someone ought to cut all this back a bit," came out of my mouth, though I didn't think to say it.

"You're a grump." She turned to look at me, scrutinizing the faded black golf shirt I had chosen for the occasion. "A grumpy old man trapped in a not-so-old body, wondering why he has to go through another decade or two before he has something real, something *tangible*, to complain about, before he can truly fit the bill."

"Pathetic, isn't it?"

"It's one afternoon. Do it for David. He's had a rough couple of years."

"Listen, I'll be as gregarious as your wildest dreams, my little bug, my sensitive one." I reached over to the warmth of the thigh beneath the edge of her skirt.

She pushed my hand away, "Quit crawling all over me for once," and resumed her leaf-catching at the window. She muttered slowly into the breeze, something like *god-damn*, but the current swept it into the trees, leaving only wisps.

Elms I recognize, but other trees, nothing I could put a name to beyond a maple here and there, gradually mixed into the brush as we got closer to the acreage. More leaves jaundiced by the sun, but the size was incomparable. Leaves eerily prehistoric in width were spinning down onto the windshield. Leaves bigger than my head. We drove further and the trees became barer. Soon the entire road was yellow and thickening, muting the gravel's churn under our tires, replacing it with noise like

a shower rebounding off the earth. I rolled up my window. I told her that if each leaf was a good intention, then we were headed straight for hell, and what a day for it.

"It's more like a yellow brick road, really. Oz or bust."

"And David is our wizard." She fell to whistling *We're off to see the wizard*, slightly out of key, as I let the steering wheel roll itself beneath my fingers and the car slip us closer.

Her arm was out the window again. But I was glancing at the other one beside me, thinking, I know this arm, it hasn't changed in all these years. Creamy and slender, half the thickness of my own, a faint whisper of amber hair, a tiny mole at the cliff of the wrist, darker hair. Yet would I know this arm out of context? Would I recognize it on its own, if it flashed through my mind as a twitching, isolated entity, unadorned by the rest of her? What about on another woman, would I see it and say, *Hey, that's Audrey's arm*?

Her whistling cut out, followed by my reverie, as we took the turnoff up to Peg and David's place. Now only David was there, Peg having left him two years back for a fling with some Czechoslovakian artist, a liaison which did not last. We still called it *Peg and David's*, for if you thought of one of them, then invariably the other would come to mind, parceled with a vision of their country house. Perfect this, perfect that, everything as it should be. We hadn't seen David since the separation. What kind of friends this made us, well, I wasn't sure, but the commute out to the boonies was certainly a bitch and we'd never seen him in the city.

The incline of the turnoff road, a path narrower still, began to level, and we came to the clearing where the acreage was, where it used to be. In its place was a lot

overgrown with weeds and waist-high grass, and a house looking as if bullied by the elements for a few decades. The wood of the veranda was wearing apart and the ground floor windows were smudgy in the spots where they weren't opaque with a milky film. The front garden had become a sun-baked chaos of twisting, withered foliage and shorn, twiggy stems that appeared meticulously stripped of green.

Audrey was staring wide-eyed at the transformation, making a clicking noise with her tongue as I turned off the ignition. She sounded like a tiny creature. Then a ticking noise came from under the hood as everything cooled down, interspersed with a click or two more from my wife. *Tick, tick, click.* At the bottom of the veranda steps a score of teeming black garbage bags were piled on top of each other, giant slugs basking in the afternoon light. Despite the disrepair of the lawn, not a single leaf could be seen on or around it, though it was generously populated with barren trees and the shadows cast by their crooked limbs. I was trying to figure how the leaves could have been raked without cutting all that grass, or if each one could have been picked individually off the ground or off the trees before falling, and what kind of man would spend that kind of time.

I wanted Audrey to resume her whistling, or just say something, but we sat another minute, taking in the absence of the home once so fastidiously kept it was almost regal, challenging you to show it anything but deference. That palace, *Peg and David's*, now just a kink in the plane of memory. In its place, this slovenly abode of a cuckolded king. But the place didn't even appear lived on, and I for one was ready to turn back.

The last time we'd been to the acreage, we were sitting at their double-leaved cherry oak table—the one they built and finished together, as a 'carpentry project'—fingering our wineglasses after a decadent meal, meticulously prepared by them both. I remember the courses well. There was cold blueberry soup, bison in a port reduction, five-flavoured gnocchi, and spring greens in a walnut vinaigrette. We'd been through many bottles of varied Italian reds. On the far wall hung several collaborative efforts—*Painted every one of them ourselves*, David announced one time—that were strangely repetitive: gobs of brown and orange, or blue and acidic yellow, with silhouettes of ominously pointy trees fading in and out between layers of colour. Some had wide black stripes running through the middle of the canvas, severing branches from stumps.

"Do you get much in the way of roaches in the city?" David had asked as we sat there, somewhat drunk, that time. He often seemed to forget that we had moved out of our north end shack years earlier, or deliberately wanted to remind me that we once had to call the exterminators. Sure, our next place had been cramped and dirty, but it wasn't infested. Audrey was silent.

"Nah, nothing like that," I had replied, looking across the table, directly at Peg, who turned her eyes from mine and nudged David. Peg had lush blond hair that was marginalized by her olive skin, dark eyebrows, and darker eyes. She looked like a bottle-dyed Spanish royal. She was quite short, and exceedingly frail, with a large nose resembling a hooked triangle in profile. I often found myself staring at her. Even when she was making a serious point she came off slightly coy, and that burdened one with the notion that he might find the chink that would collapse the

entire wall. Ever since we had become acquainted—she had worked with Audrey at Human Resources downtown—I knew that I wanted something from her, yet nothing I could put a name to. I had definitely wanted to sleep with her, but the word *desire* didn't quite fit. I wanted recognition, a sign, an acknowledgement that I knew a different Peg lived beneath the combined identity she assumed so effortlessly with David.

"Tell them, sweetie," she had said then, playing with his hand. "Tell them your dream."

"Well, baby, it wasn't all that interesting. Just a coincidence." He winked at her, and then filled our glasses with more wine, as if to say, *Now I'll indulge you after all*. "I dreamed roaches. Enormous ones. South American six-inchers and bigger. Thousands of them crawling up the hill towards us, climbing up to our little piece of heaven here." He looked at Peg and she nodded back at him so that, though she clearly already knew the story, he recited the rest fixed on her like we weren't in the room. "…I had a shovel from the yard and my own two feet as weapons, to defend our home, swinging down or stomping on each one that came near. But they were quick, the little buggers. I cut a lot of them in two. But here's the thing, the bodies kept on crawling without their heads. Eventually they overwhelmed me and I was on my back, and I saw all those bodies up on the veranda, decapitated cockroaches everywhere, pushing open the door and breaking through the windows. And then all I saw was brown, must have been a couple of them on my face, I can only guess. I woke up choking." He talked as if it had all come from a history book. Peg had been nodding as if under a spell at that point.

"I had to shake him out of it, he was so agitated."

"It was like," and he looked at me and Audrey and had to pause as if we had just walked in, then recovered himself. "It was like I was still under some kind of attack, but I was awake."

"Forces," said Peg.

"Hey, you took my line."

"Cutey, have it back."

"Forces?" Audrey interrupted, a skeptical flare in her eyes.

"Spiritual forces." As Peg had said this above the table I received my blessed sign, for below it her bare foot had kicked into my ankle and held there for a few seconds. I could feel a toenail dig in. That was something new. Pockets of warmth opened up all over my body. I took a gulp of wine, getting used to that touch. But she continued to look at David. "Something was up that night, playing against us, right baby?"

"We're very spiritual, you know. Very *aware*," said David, and normally that would be him playing the ham, but his face had stayed steady.

After a few moments, Audrey lit a cigarette and asked, "So, what exactly was the coincidence?"

"Oh. David looked up cockroaches in the morning and found out that the bodies can actually live briefly without their heads."

"Up to seven days without their heads, babe. Seven days. It'd be longer if the bodies could find a way to drink water without their heads."

I momentarily forgot that foot on my ankle.

"Quite some time, anyway," said Peg, as if reining him in.

"But the point is, honey, how could I have known that the headless bodies can still function? I didn't. But in the dream, my dream, it was the same. *They* sure didn't need their heads. Mereiless creatures."

"So," I ventured, "may I ask where your darling wife was during all this? Was she in the house, waiting to get devoured, or what?" Peg had been studying her wine glass when I looked at her for a millisecond before turning and leaning in to smell my wife's hair and nuzzle my nose a bit. She laughed and pushed me away.

"Ahhh, my Peg was probably late at work," said David, stretching in a satisfied way, "or in town doing something or other. Anyway that's beside the point." But it wasn't beside the point weeks later when I devoured her and she me on two occasions, one of them in an expensive downtown hotel room with a view of the river valley that would make you weep.

Later that night, though, as was our habit after an evening with David and Peg, Audrey and I found ourselves home in bed, recasting anecdotes and discussions in a new mocking light, into the small hours of the morning. The levity of our drunkenness was tethered by something bitter.

"If you were a cockroach, I'd definitely chop your head off."

"I'm too *spiritual* for your petty vengeances, your pathetic exterminations."

I neglected to mention the foot that had struck my ankle, and really I'd have to be a prude to do so. We were too busy anyway, questioning every detail of our friends, this supremely insulated couple. We laughed, feeling superior as we mocked the folly of their affections and gestures. We tried to outdo each other with

impressions. But afterwards, in the dark, a crooked smirk still fading on Audrey's mouth, my stomach sore from all the laughing, something had hovered just above our heads as we tried to fall asleep. A kind of bubble, a sphere of craving for something more, that would go un-popped as we tossed and turned just beneath its radiating underside.

David met us at the door, swinging it open just as Audrey's knuckles were about to test the wood. Before she could lower her arm he stepped out and hugged her, tightly, holding on. Given the general state of disrepair I thought we'd entered a different world with a lost nutter at its heart, but no, this was David, albeit a changed man. His hair was longer now, and pulled back from his high forehead in a short ponytail, silvering throughout. He wore a baggy red tracksuit with white stripes and, curiously, a broad woven scarf, perhaps a shawl, braced his neck and tapered over the angles of his shoulders.

"It's been so long, David," Audrey said as he let her go.

"Too long," he chimed, squeezing her hands. "For dear friends like us, it's been too long."

"How ya doin, David," I drawled, touching his shoulder. He gave a bit of a start, as if I carried an electric current, and shot out a hand toward me.

"Wonderful." He smiled, showing straight white teeth, but he wouldn't meet my eyes with his. "It's good to see you, sir." Something shrill had crept into his voice, lying down to make a nest somewhere in his throat.

"We know you love scotch, so." Audrey handed him a bottle.

"You've always been so thoughtful, Audrey." He hugged her again. I turned to look at the yard and wondered if the sun was at its zenith already, burning through the empty trees, wondered how it could be so hot in the middle of October.

Inside, it was orderly and immaculate as ever, betrayed only by the milky windows and the smoky half-light they let in. Something seemed off as we followed the swish of David's track pants down the dark hallway into the dining room, so I tugged on Audrey's sleeve, but that only provoked a dirty look. Sitting down, you couldn't help but feel Peg's absence. Apparently she'd gone back to Victoria, her hometown, without leaving Audrey a number to reach her at. She was probably with someone else now. When, exactly, she left David was certainly a point of curiousity. He got up to raise the blinds and let the afternoon light in, revealing the new state of the far wall.

The old nature pieces were now in the midst of large slapdash portraits, some in charcoals, some in dark oils. There were over twenty of them, jammed so close together that the top half of the wall was all paintings, as if three giant rolls of film had been stretched out and stapled up. Rolls of Peg, for each portrait was unmistakably her. Audrey and I were both looking at David who was admiring his work. This was obsessive, but surely there are worse ways to work through a divorce, I was thinking. They seemed merely like the work of a promising high school art student, but were remarkable all the same. He'd gotten her nose right, except in a few, where it was grotesque, bulbous and splitting. The eyes were incredible—a pair laughing, then surprised, another jaded, a blank faraway stare, heavy lidded, one pair pooling black fury. The detail of his wife's expressions so

carefully wrought, I was struck by how he must have loved her, loved her in such an exacting way. This gallery of loss must have been constructed, in her absence, by memory. Or he could have worked from photos. But no, they were better than that. This was him remembering her.

"Someone's been busy," Audrey said, as good-naturedly as she could, gesturing at the wall.

"It's therapeutic, mostly. But it takes up more and more of my time. Perhaps you'll better be able to appreciate…" He got up and went over to unhook an oil piece from the bottom row. He rested the painting on the arms of the chair beside him, leaning it against the back, so that when he sat down it was the four of us again, like old times, him across from Audrey and Peg from me. Only now it was Peg with ridges of paint cropping up at the bridge of her nose, a red hue mixed into the burnt butter sheen of her hair, head tilted to the right, towards David, eyes set slightly moist and widened, caught in the very moment of realization, of some grave epiphany, mouth held in a soft 'O.' This painted Peg, propped up as she was, sat about as tall as the real Peg had.

"The likeness is, well, it's her, isn't it," Audrey said, without taking much of a look at it close up. She was trying to avoid it and concentrate on David. But me, as we sat there the next hour in and out of silence, sipping coffee and scotch (David positioned his own tumbler slightly in front of the portrait), I couldn't take my eyes off it. Audrey was talking, asking David questions and offering up everything from our mortgage to the baptism of our godson, from inflation to some French director's

most recent film, all of which seemed only to bewilder him. It was too quiet at some point, David staring at the table.

I mentioned that it was beautiful out, that we ought to take a stroll or something. "In the city you just can't move around like out here."

"Cloudless," David said without moving.

"Hmm?"

"Cloudless. It's clear, the sky. This reminds me of what I'm working on next." He shifted in his chair and looked over confidentially at the likeness of the woman who had left him. "You know, in Russia they manipulate the weather, for a special holiday. The Soviets send up planes, love. They go back and forth to clear away the clouds over Moscow, over Minsk, to make sure the sun gets through. They need sun for their big day."

I asked him if that was true. He cocked his head but didn't look my way. I liked the image, the pathos of humans shooting machines into the atmosphere, to tamper with nature, to *force* a nice day. I told him I thought it was fantastic.

"He thinks it's 'fantastic,'" David muttered, more to the painting than to us. Audrey and I looked at each other. I shrugged but something resembling worry had crossed her brow. I was still looking at her when I realized he had turned to focus on me. "There's nothing fantastic about it." His face became nearly the red of his track suit. "It's totalitarianism, plain and simple. They think they can control everything over there. Even the goddamn weather. It's disgusting. That's the same mentality that will take us back to the brink, that will wipe us out, isn't that right, honey?" He rattled his fingers on top of the canvas.

"The brink, David?" Had he not opened a paper since Peg had left him? Was it possible that he hadn't left the acreage? The end of the Cold War was already ancient news by then. Not to mention glasnost, not to mention the sixties.

"Nuclear holocaust. All humanity wiped out. Nothing left but the roaches."

"David. Dave, is everything alright?" Audrey patted his hand across the table. A light went out in his eyes as he slumped into his chair, steadying his hand on top of the painting, as if it was resting on Peg's head. "We're here, David. We're still here."

But now he leaned forward, fixing his eyes straight on me, saying, "I could squash you. You are an insignificant little thing and I could squash you."

I opened my mouth and then closed it.

"David," Audrey repeated but he wouldn't snap out of it. She looked at me. "Go put it back," she said firmly to me, nodding at the painting. Did this mean we were leaving? It must have been adrenaline, for I did get up and grab the canvas from beside him, without thinking what he might do to me.

"Go ahead. Take it away like you took away my wife."

Now this was something. I walked over and put it back in its place so that the puzzle was complete again. And that's when I saw it, camouflaged within the old tree paintings, done in the same colours. Another face that could only be mine, garishly done in charcoal. A boy lost in the woods. My heart began to beat faster. I turned and looked at David. The ponytail and shroud and track suit. The wreckage. I thought then, How easily we manage to topple ourselves. How I hated this man's blatant longing, his total submission to another person.

I didn't want to sit back down. "Let's go, then," I said to Audrey. David refilled our glasses, letting mine overflow.

"I know that you fucked my wife." He said this so nonchalantly that—combined with my nervousness—an irrepressible chuckle welled up in me, which sent his hands gesturing haphazardly in the air, following no course but their own. One of them landed in a little puddle of scotch. "You horny little bastard, running around with your balls on your sleeve. But there are consequences, oh you'll find that out soon enough. Justice shall prevail. Karma, karma."

"We're going," I said again. Audrey was up then, clearing mugs, glasses and plates off the table, balancing it all in her hands so easily, with calm resolve on her face, in her downcast eyes. There was a loneliness to her movements, as if we were indeed in the aftermath of something, and she was already quietly starting over. A dull ache lodged itself in my chest. I could not respond to him, not in his state, not beneath the multiple freakshow gazes of his estranged wife who, sure, I formerly had an infatuation with. I was holding my breath until we could get out of there. David remained sitting, glaring at me as I followed Audrey into the kitchen. I heard him say *Karma* again.

We had to wait at the back door while he fetched a baking pan we had left over the holidays a few years back. "Sorry to keep it so long," he said, handing it to Audrey. He kissed her on the cheek as I opened the door. "Good to see you. Don't be a stranger now."

"Get some rest, David," was all she said.

We were halfway to the car when he cupped his hands around his mouth to yell, "Home-wrecker!" But with the smile he flashed and the wide swath his hand carved in the air, it might easily have been *Take care*.

I rolled down my window as we sped away from the house.

"If you slept with her…" she began, almost tenderly.

"I didn't, Audrey."

"I'm just saying if you did…"

"I didn't. You're my wife, for Christ's sake." But I knew then without a doubt that I'd have to talk to her, and things would be different, if only we could make it home first. In our condo, surrounded by square kilometers of cement and metal and other buildings, that is where it would take place. And let me tell you, that place would be a relief.

At the bottom of the turnoff road was his mailbox, *Peg & David* still stenciled down the side, spilling mail out its flag-topped door like the fuselage of a stomach turned inside out. We slowed down to look at it. I was about to turn onto the main road when she said, "We ought to run all that back up to him." I held my foot on the brake and looked at her a moment. She winked at me then, dimpling her cheek in the process. I would know that contortion anywhere.

"No. What we ought to do is get back home, as fast as we can."

"And do what?" She put her hand on my neck but I didn't say anything. Neither of us did. We were going triumphantly back to our cramped and overpriced living quarters. We turned onto the road and it struck me how beautiful the country really was at that time of year, but it was probably because we were on our way out.

The sun had started to slip sideways through the trees, still radiating an unnatural warmth. I brought the RPMs up a while before putting it into fifth, so the strained engine might announce our exit from that hinterland. My watch showed quarter past four. It had been a short visit.

Tending the Dead

There was the pressing need to do something about the body of Vera which remained lying in her room next door. But sitting in the upstairs study her son Davis withstood the occasional volley of urgency by rubbing his temples, lighting another cigarette, glancing over at the wall between the rooms and blowing smoke rings at it in the fashion of his late father, dead for decades, who had been an expert at many things tough. Davis wasn't as good at smoke rings. There were certain things he needed to hide from his wife Monica, whom he'd been with for ten years, the most successful of his three marriages as far as length was concerned. He didn't hide enough from the other women; he said too much and in each case the act of speech precipitated a downfall. Now Davis was mid-fifties and knew better. Among things hidden from Monica were the cigarettes from the bottom of one of his desk drawers, placed there months ago. They were dry as kindling and wheedled down in a hurry as Davis puffed one after another. The thickening, noxious haze filled the study and seemed to slow down the moments, to a standstill, as if time was being siphoned out with the remaining oxygen. And the smoke rings Davis imagined sending right through the wall and onto his mother's bed, crowning her head and haloing down her body to make amends, or to consecrate, or to seal unfinished business. All secrets, hers and his, would go to rest with her. "Good of you to go on a weekend, Vera," he spoke aloud, then bit his lip to quell a quiver that became a giggle. She had been gone for two hours. At the moment he was relishing the elongated seconds and minutes, feeling a kind of relief: his mother's death meant the end of an era.

Beyond the wall was originally a guest room but Davis and Monica had forced the aging Vera to move into it for what turned out to be the last two years of her life. They did not want her to be alone as the end neared, for in a way they'd seen it coming. She had been slowing down. And one can still die of natural causes in their seventies, it remains an acceptable age to go in your sleep, no shame in that. Davis heard the click of a door handle from the hallway and then footsteps he knew to be Monica's. He snapped to life and locked the door of his study, then turned the portable stereo on, playing his old Rolling Stones at a startling volume. "As Tears Go By" sounded more important at that elevated level. He opened the window, letting the sharp, twenty-below air rush in and slap at him as he sat in his computer chair. It was eight at night, two nights before New Year's Eve, and snowing.

He looked at the monitor and decided to check his messages, finding a new one from a stranger who had sought him out to ask if he might consider taking up with his old rock band again to play a local benefit concert. He had played bass in "The Animôts" on the side in his thirties and somehow there remained a small following. Now he quickly crafted an answer: *Very good of you to write, I really appreciate your words of encouragement. I will not be reuniting nor playing in the foreseeable future, but of course one never knows what the future might hold... music will always be in my blood!* He leaned back and sent it off. It seemed to Davis like only a few careless seconds passed before a reply arrived: *Don't patronize me you washed-up has-been. You'll regret this.* Davis stared blankly at the screen. That, I will not, he thought. He deleted the message and went to the BBC site, where he found a link to a video of the world event of the day, perhaps of the year. He watched

a silent clip released by authorities, of Saddam Hussein about to be executed, surrounded by men in ominous ski masks, everyone acting fairly routine, some talking, and then a giant noose slid around the famous man's neck before the film faded to black.

The last time he saw Vera alive was earlier that night when he had walked into the den, and she and Monica abruptly stopped their conversation. He had long been an invisible entity in his own house. The former norm was Monica's discomfort with what she called Vera's 'abrasive wit,' in fact neither had trusted the other, but when his mother moved in they became friends. "Yeah, well, you two suffocate me, just so you know," he had said, and left. You two; me. Now, at the computer, trying to counterattack an ambush of regret that those were his last words to Vera, he stretched his arms and began to shiver under the breath of the open window.

*

In the next room, Monica was looking at the body again. Her mother-in-law had left the world like an infant, with a layer of baby fat hanging off her body and the tip of her thumb between her teeth. Vera was on her side with her knees drawn up, the duvet thrown back so that her fully veined, bare feet were exposed. Monica knew that these were the feet, according to Vera, that had walked out on over a dozen jobs and boyfriends which she refused to 'bend over backwards for' over the years. "Most people are always doing the opposite of what they should," Vera had once told her. "They want one thing but settle for another without even batting an eye. Nobody flinches, and it repulses me. Life's too long for that anti-drama." Anti-drama was a Vera concept. After failing to find a heartbeat, Monica had watched Davis gently

shake her, hopelessly, one last time. Monica wouldn't touch the body; touching would confirm the truth. He had pulled back Vera's eyelids to look at her pupils, almost routinely, Monica thought. Clinically, like he'd done it a million times and wanted to make sure it was truly over with, so he could go hide in his study. Monica herself had taken a pill—she took them regularly over the past few years to help her sleep, and sometimes to tend to being awake—and lay down in her room only to swim through consciousness for over an hour. Now she looked at her old friend Vera and winced.

So Vera had gone and snuck off to some other astral plane, without warning, leaving her there in that house, in that world, alone. Monica also had places to slip away to, but they involved men. So she was not alone in the sense that there was no husband, nor that there was no beautiful and sexually unparalleled lover—fortuitously, an undertaker—nor was there a lack of a rich older man, a potential 'something' with whom she had gone for coffee and the symphony twice. But alone all the same. She was near the door and on a whim she waved her hand back and forth against the light switch, over and over, faster then slower, creating a strobe effect. In the pulsing light she watched the body appear and disappear with such haste that it seemed to move slightly, making her slightly dizzy. She thought of times trying to dance a halting clumsy waltz with her in the living room downstairs. She thought of how her life had been infinitely more interesting in the versions of it she recounted to Vera, long into the night at the kitchen table over pots of tea and Grand Marnier. Back on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Monica had been rubbing Vera's shoulders with tiger balm and talking about one of her daydreams, the one where she

switches careers and opens, no less, her own restaurant. "People would come just for my famous potatoes," said Monica.

"They are good," Vera had conceded. "But they're just Elsie's potatoes with lemon added—you're not fooling anyone, dear! Davis could show you a thing or two with potatoes. And pork—incredible." In over a decade he had never cooked for Monica beyond a bit of barbequing, and Vera knew this. Monica pinched her teasingly and let her hands drop down Vera's back. "Name," Vera said. Monica didn't know what she meant. "Name, Monica? What would you call this starch haven diner of yours?"

"Well I don't have that figured."

"How do you expect something to catch on when you can't even imagine its name?" Vera had craned her head around and glared up at Monica, apparently disappointed. Then she smirked and her eyes softened, turning back around. "I don't know how old you'll be when you start running after things. For starters why don't you run over to the lazy susan and fix us some Christmas cheer."

For the most part they had told each other everything. Now, Monica left the light off and walked over to the bed. Without fear of betrayal or condemnation, she had told Vera of her lover Jacob, the undertaker who was a genius lay, and that was a relief, as if it was equivalent to telling Davis. No, Monica thought, it was completely different, better, than telling Davis. That the listener was his mother didn't matter—though she had warned Monica to make sure Davis didn't know of the affair—for their relationship lived outside of its origins and proper definition. They had long ago stopped considering each other to be in-laws.

The sharing of secrets also included Monica hearing what Davis had never told her, what his father did to him, something Vera said she could never comprehend how it was she didn't see it to stop it, for she surely would have, even if that meant killing the man. Still, another time, Vera grimly admitted to Monica one evening that she had an idea something was happening—and her husband hadn't exactly been easy on her either—but she didn't know the full extent of it until after he was gone. There were already huge chasms between Monica and Davis for some time when Vera told her this, but it got worse and he became more of a stranger to her because he had never said it himself. So who is this, she had thought then, who actually is behind this person? But for her to bring it up was unthinkable. Now, there in the room, before she knew it, Monica was on all fours on the bed and then lying beside the body of Vera, bending her own shape into an echo of the older woman's fractured S, keeping an inch between their curves. Then she leaned in and hugged the body from behind. It had already become a neutral temperature, she thought. After being still a minute, Monica became bold and reached over to gently pull at Vera's chicken-skin forearm, to take the hand away from the mouth. It seemed improper to Monica, a mockery; this position was not a fitting tribute to Vera's life. But the hand remained where it was like the jaw had locked on the thumb. Monica gave a couple of violent tugs but it was going nowhere.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, she called Jacob, whispering. "You have to come. Just show up sometime tonight, won't you?" she pleaded into the phone. The impracticality of it all suddenly struck her. The fact that there was the body upstairs, what used to be Vera, and Davis wouldn't even talk about what they ought to do next.

"This can't be left overnight. No one ever goes at home anymore, do they."

"Actually, Monica, not at all," Jacob said, soothing through the phone. "It's okay. My brother always says home is the most dignified place to permanently leave this earth. It really is widely practiced. We're on our way, so."

"Can't you come alone?" She was rooting through the freezer and found some frozen yoghurt.

"We're a team—how am I to not bring him? I'm sorry, but to him this is business."

"To hell with business, and your brother," she sobbed, digging straight into the yoghurt container with a butter knife from the countertop. "I'm sorry. Idiot." She was condemned to be alone from here on in, and Jacob seemed obtuse, so she hung up on him, and then wondered if he might come over anyway.

*

On the other side of the city, Jacob tried and failed to put some distance between the old Impala and the SUV behind them which was missing a headlight. Despite the hearse's length and black windows the SUV's single beam was ultra-bright and still aimed perfectly to blind him periodically through the rearview mirror. His younger brother Mats was in the passenger seat. They were a dying breed, the two of them, small-time undertakers in their cheap black suits and ties, in their bucket of bolts '73 Impala which couldn't outrun anything, abandoned by their older brother months back when he gave up on the business and returned to their family home in Sweden. Middle brother Jacob seethed at this betrayal, but was also happy to be Director now. Yet business had been slow—people weren't dying fast enough—and he was

incrementally going insane working solely with Mats who was hard to keep in check, who didn't have much of a life beyond work and always managed to make the most routine jobs difficult. At thirty-five Mats still lacked fundamental social graces, and displayed the lack increasingly now that their elder had left. He could be an incessant talker, quasi-philosophy of oblivion being his specialty, and even as an embalmer he talked, got close to the bodies before they went in. It was nothing sexual, but a lot of quiet unreciprocated conversation, questions that went unanswered, for the next world. Sometimes he mocked. "Hummers are a lesson in man's insecurity and efficiency at self-destruction," Mats said now, apparently meaning the vehicle that pulled out into the next lane over.

"It's not," Jacob said, turning up the radio. "Look, just keep it to a minimum when we get over there, alright? The talk. Let me work."

"You work, right. Precisely." He lit a cigarette and puffed like he wouldn't get it back, then handed it to Jacob. "Maybe your friend will be inspiration for you to do a good job. Monica of the moneyed class. I could run interference for you." Jacob closed his eyes and flicked the half-good smoke out the window, making sparks as the butt bounced. "So, does the principality of Monica have its own ruler?"

"Not another word," Jacob said through his teeth. But then, more soothingly, in Swedish, "You are a sick and twisted individual." This time he lit another cigarette to make amends and passed it to his brother. There was the matter of putting up with one's blood, to the breaking point, especially when it was running thin now that they were fumbling toward bankruptcy by themselves, without their former captain. But

there was also clinging to one's blood and obliging that blood's ridiculous dreams and mutterings. The ravings of a lunatic shed from the selfsame womb.

*

At the house, Monica was looking out the window with her back to him when Davis walked into the kitchen. He cleared his throat to no effect. The dog was collapsed, snoring on the laminate. *Dog, no kids* had always been their mantra, and they would say it at dinner parties like it was the most exclusive private joke imaginable, though neither found it funny. Monica had her career, and Davis had never imagined himself a father anyway. He began peeling a mandarin orange. "Who was that?" said Davis. "Thought I heard you on the phone. I hope you didn't go telling anyone."

Monica didn't turn around or move at all. "Just that Jacob guy," she said flatly. "You know him, Davey. Thought it might as well be them."

"Them what? How about not them—those triplets?" He was incredulous. He was never sure, to begin with, what kind of man dealt so plainly with another's immediate loss, with death, but these morticians went around with what Davis saw as a curious sense of palliative entitlement. He'd seen the brothers at a few wakes and around enough, with their haughty Scandinavian manner acted out by their long bodies and cold, piercing good looks. Davis had heard them talked about in low voices, revered, but he resented them. He knew that the one's circle overlapped with Monica's.

The last time he and Monica had had sex was after he watched her doing an extreme cardio-yoga routine in the den along with a video and its new age host named Zorene who had arms like meter sticks, Monica gyrating her core and extremities in

every direction like twisted bouncing springs. He had been jealous that she was light years away from being so athletic and freakish in bed with him, and came on to her only to be proven that this trend would not be changing despite the vigour and innovation of her workout. That time was three years prior. And Davis had often considered in general that Monica was having an affair with some random figure, but in the end he would always think himself paranoid. But even in weaker moments he wouldn't reckon she was with someone who tended the dead.

"Davey we can't just do nothing," Monica said to the window. "And they're not triplets. Nor twins. There's just the two now, Davey." This was an affectionate name culled from the distant past.

"Look, I'd just as soon keep this anonymous for a bit. Especially not those guys."

"Anonymous—what is the matter with you? Well, they're on their way. You can't leave a body lying." Her back was still to him. Then Davis lobbed a segment of orange at her but it dropped well short, hitting the dog in the ass. The animal roused with a yelp, her head snapping around, nightmares of plague, famine, and ambush still present in her anxious eyes. Monica turned and kneeled to calm her, stroking her ears, and looked up at Davis.

"Good of them to come so late, I suppose," he sighed.

"What did you do when your dad passed away?" said Monica, cooing at the dog.

Davis convulsed slightly and glared at her, but her head was down. Up to that very moment and surely forever there would be two distinct periods in Davis's life:

his father alive, and his father dead. We buried him deep, he was thinking. It was a heart attack, at home, Davis barely fifteen. He had been at his father's side, as usual. "The ambulance came because there was a chance, a possibility it didn't finish him off at first. But Vera seemed to know his time was up. I remember her arms crossed tight, standing straight as a board against the wall, waiting for the medics to get on with it. Later, in the night, from then on, there was just the two of us."

"Well," said Monica, taking the leash out of the drawer and clicking it onto the dog's collar. "We need some air, me and him. Just around the block, okay?"

"Good. I'll listen for the door." As soon as she left, Davis went back up to his study and locked himself in, turning the music back on. Besides that sight of his mother back then, he could also, if he chose, remember what went on for years, the secret he thought was solely his now, victoriously stifled for good. His father being tough, particularly when it was just the two of them. At its earliest, there was kissing his father's 'tommy,' as they had called their cocks, which didn't seem to the nine-year-old Davis a matter of toughness. But what was later, at its worst, was being asked to partially strip, then bent over the same orange coffee table every time in the slow dusty light of mid-afternoon and entered deeply with that same member, for minutes that felt longer than minutes. His cheek flat on the table's finish, his neck exposed as if waiting for a guillotine to come down. But that was four decades past, and now at last it could stay there.

*

After Monica was back from walking, Jacob and his brother were at the door. "Monica," said Jacob. "I'm so sorry about all this." He hugged her curtly as his

brother pushed past them into the hallway. Monica considered the brother a moment, his eyes and a sternness about the mouth, and found him as brutish as ever.

"Pardon me, madam, but where is the mortuary?" said Mats.

"Right, okay then," Jacob said, rolling his eyes at Monica. "I'm really sorry about this. He means the room of the departed, where your mother-in-law is." He turned to his brother. "Which isn't actually one and he knows it." They followed Mats up the stairs, Monica sneaking her hand around where it met Jacob's against her rear. "He gets satisfaction out of exploring, accurately or not for everyone's benefit, the historical richness of our profession through its very terms. My brother is accumulating cultural capital all the time."

In the upstairs hallway his brother paused, sniffing side to side, as if discerning the presence of spirits on the other sides of the walls. He put a giant palm flat against a wall like he questioned its durability. Jacob looked Monica in the eyes with kindness and she wanted to touch him. Nobody said anything, and for moments it was quieter than a mausoleum. Davis emerged from his study and thanked the men for coming, for doing their job, looking them each in the eye as he did. Monica pitied him then, that he could pretend to be so affable no matter what the circumstance. He had changed into a black suit and tie, and could have been a third, senior mortician if he had a pea jacket like the other two. Monica couldn't stand being in the hallway with all the silent men at once. With Davis and Jacob. "It's just through there," she said, pointing to the next door down.

Jacob paused at the door. "I need a witness to go in there with me." Monica and Davis looked at each other, but for Monica there was no question that it would be

her. Davis shrugged, and then she stepped forward. "My brother has some paperwork and will go over some options with you in the meantime," said Jacob to Davis, who Monica thought looked a little oblivious to any external stimuli.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

"Fine. I'm great really, never felt lighter," he said, and pointed her along with his chin toward the room, then even gave her a light nudge. With no small relief, Monica left him in the hall with Mats. Jacob was carefully closing the door behind them when Davis yelled, "Just a second!" Monica's heart began to race as the two men met in the doorway. "Aren't you forgetting this?" said Davis, handing Jacob the black briefcase that was leaning against the wall. "Of course, thank you," Jacob said, his shoulders relaxing. They both seemed to nod at each other for a moment. Then Davis turned away.

In the dark room Monica stood beside Jacob at the foot of the bed. She noticed that Vera was in the exact pose she had left her in, forgetting alteration was not a possibility. Jacob's hand slowly swept a banner of long black hair away from Monica's face. It clasped the top of her ear a moment before falling again. Though she was a bit older than him, only early forties, she knew that her face was still handsome and her eyes big and commanding, so much that he probably skipped over her long beak of a bird nose, or possibly found it strangely complimentary to her other features. It would be good, she thought, to stay here with Vera a few more moments and then leave directly, jumping out the window if she had to, with Jacob. Without Vera, she could not imagine another night in the house.

"A 'witness?' Is that what I am to you now?" said Monica, playfully.

"You haven't called," he said, drawing her hand up to his lips. "It's been days."

"Oh. Well, you know, it was a little busy around here." She pulled her hand away. "What do you suggest I do over the holidays? Hide you under the table at Christmas dinner?"

"I would do it. I would be quiet as a mouse!" He laughed and made an attempt at a rodent face. This towering man was still on the other side of the mysterious barrier that separated the truly young from the established and calcified. He possessed a definite strength, like an expectation of life, she thought, that younger men may have, an expectation for circumstance to deliver and when it didn't they would bend it until it gave in or it snapped into pieces. Or dare it to snap them first. He was burrowing his nose into her shoulder and she began laughing too, quietly, with a tear saddling out of the side corner of her eye. In the moment she felt a respite from being merely alone again in the house with Davis instead of what it so recently was: living with Vera, loving her, with Davis lurking somewhere in the background. Jacob began kissing her neck and she let him before bringing his face to hers. They looked at each other a moment, with noses touching, before she stepped across the room and pushed in the doorknob, locking it.

"I wish I could talk to her again," said Monica, returning, her forearms up framing his neck. "Just a few more times before she went." Jacob went on kissing her. She had registered before the immediacy of his wanting. The fact that it couldn't wait, that he seemed to create a world that held only the two of them and all else was inconsequential. She could learn from him. His hands were in her shirt.

She was learning. They paused and looked at Vera's body a moment, wondering what to do, whether they should or not, then looked at each other again. Jacob shrugged coyly. The expression on Vera's face seemed closed, but in a playful way, Monica thought, as if she was purposely averting her eyes. And it seemed urgent, after all, this might be their only chance for days and weeks and beyond that Monica did not want to think. They had been together a dozen times at least but to her it was still like they were nearly strangers. He lowered himself onto the cliff of the bed and she sat on his knee. He played with her hair some more and helped her out of her shirt and bra. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, short of breath, shifting on top of him. "You met Vera a couple of times—what struck you most about her?"

Jacob grunted and then lost the balance of her and they slipped off, down onto the floor with a heavy thud. Monica stifled a laugh and Jacob hushed her with his finger to her lips, his face mocking gravity. She pulled him closer to hug her on the floor, but he scooped her up swiftly and brought her down onto the bed, her head hitting Vera's ankle. His hand pushed her skirt up eagerly, then began massaging between her legs. But pleasure was quickly trumped by something welling up in her head, like the strange feeling of coming to after being unconscious. All at once she needed off of the bed. She didn't want this beside Vera, didn't want to live like this. "Not here…" she hissed. Jacob wasn't letting up though, putting his head between her legs as she tried to close them. She turned and strained her neck, looking up at Vera, as if for reassurance once more that it might be alright after all. The woman's, the body's, thumb had detached from her teeth and now was an inch away from her chin, pointing at herself. "Jesus, it came out," said Monica. And she thought perhaps

Vera didn't want this either, any of it, that she was watching and disapproved and this was her sign. "Jacob, for God's sake get off of me!" He stayed where he was, and they struggled a moment, but she managed to squirm and knee him in the head and there was the knocking sound of bone on bone.

"Oh what the fuck is the matter with you," Jacob complained, in agony, while Monica bounced off the bed and peered back in close at Vera, ignoring him.

"What is it?" she whispered to Vera. Then to Jacob, hoarsely: "She moved, I know she moved."

"Come off it," said Jacob, rubbing his head. "We moved her. And, by the way, she was your goddamn mother-in-law from a marriage that doesn't even exist except on paper. And that's not even her. That *was* her. She *was*."

"I look at her and I see promise, I see the future. She'll show me."

"But I'm your future," Jacob blurted sharply and pushed off of the bed toward her.

"You? Who are you?" Monica sidestepped him and walked to the foot of the bed, grabbing her blouse and pulling it over her head. Then she was at the door, jostling the lock and yanking it open. "Please leave. Please. Don't forget your brother on the way out, or I'll, well, I don't know what. I'll wring his neck!" She was holding the door and looking at the carpet, shaking a bit, trying to hold her nerve.

"Monica, don't be stupid," he said in the doorway. The sound of someone on the stairs seemed to have convinced him to go. "Don't you want us to get her ready? Take her in?"

Monica looked at the body of Vera. "She's not leaving. I'm calling a priest or something in the morning." From the hallway Jacob scoffed at this, chuckled with a knowing cruelty she hadn't seen before, as if her every particle was nakedly open to ridicule. But in a cauterizing glimmer of that cruelty she felt truly okay, though nothing necessarily had changed, and following that was a remarkable satisfaction to be getting rid of him, so she could be alone to reflect on Vera, on the house and its other owner Davis, and on what would become of every little thing.

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Davis had not lasted long in that same hallway with Mats. They stood a few feet apart, their backs to opposite walls, looking at each other occasionally in the complete silence that crept up after the other two had left. Not an awkward silence for Davis, for shock was fading and he was beginning to feel the predictable irony of the deflated and the weary. Of course I'm standing here with this man, he thought, where else on earth would I be. He looked up at the undertaker who was a head taller and who met Davis's eyes, who then solemnly nodded his head in an affected empathy Davis found repulsive. "So what are you doing here?" Davis said casually before he could stop himself, yet the man seemed emboldened and very pleased to be asked.

"The world can change on and on," said Mats, conspiratorially, "transforming through generations, civilizations. Technology, advances in every field imaginable. Everything becomes obsolete. Epochs will turn on their heads, until it's soon all over, but in the meantime there will always be a need for morticians. We're irreplaceable."

"Right," Davis said, checking his watch. "Well, I guess that's your calling card then. Thanks."

"You know in some societies," the man began again, bolstering confidence, "to this day, the people have traditionally erected a mortuary pole. Take the Haida. Or, where I come from, the Sami—you probably call them Laplanders—do something very engaging."

"I don't particularly feel the need to discuss matters," Davis said quickly, making to walk away. "My wife will see to those."

"But there is a saying you may have heard, 'Life is not given twice.' Well, let me tell you: death is not given twice. It's a sacred process. We mustn't ignore the details of its handling. I could help you with a pole, or something like it. The offer's on the table. How a man conducts himself regarding another's passing, whether or not he looks the thing in its very eye, is one of the true measures of his character."

Was the man an undertaker or a lecturer? Davis's impatience was roused, but he managed to dilute his anger before it reached the surface. "Well, I think it's under control," he said, "and anything you might suggest…"

"Confrontation!" said the mortician, his finger in the air. "You have to draw the battle lines and then own them. Don't be a sheep like the rest. I've seen men cower. I've seen animals. I've seen days where the sun doesn't go down. Above all else, you maintain dignity. Surely, as our lives are snuffed one by one, and the planet itself is wiped out, indisputably, we must at least conduct ourselves with dignity."

"Dignity. Good," said Davis. "Good of you to offer guidance. Look, I'm in a bit of a state after all. Tired. There's a cabinet above the sink down in the kitchen.

Why don't you fix yourself something while you're waiting for them to, well, finish. And all best to you in the New Year."

With that Davis was back in his study before the man could object, but as the door was closing he heard him say, "Yes, it could be our last."

Alone again, Davis surveyed his suited figure with its head on top in the closet door mirror. He had always looked more like his mother, the same pale blue eyes, curly hair and facial bone structure. But in that moment the way his jaw jutted out, though perhaps it was nothing new, seemed then more like his father. It was menacing and pathetic at once. His tie hung strangely with a crook in it, so he retied and tightened. He didn't want his mother's traits within his own to start vanishing. He wondered if that would happen as he continued to age. He began to idealize Vera's face, remembering it had only slightly muted in recent years, had a radiant expressiveness which exuded intelligence, held eyes which could mock and flatter at the same time. In his adolescence she taught him how to read and disarm any person or situation, though he was no longer sure if he could. "It's never what it seems," she would say. And when he thought about it, razor-sharp women had always been around him throughout his life. His mother and his aunts during adolescence. His only friends at the office. Monica and his two previous wives. He had taken from all of them, yet if he had to think of what he'd returned, he would be at a loss. And as far as Vera went, he could do nothing for her now.

He turned off the light and sat down at his desk, the icy blue glow from the monitor spilling over his knuckles as he aimlessly plugged in addresses. Through the window he noticed it was still snowing, but letting up a bit, and the night sky had

taken on a muted, industrial orange hue as it does sometimes during the small hours in the city, as if reflecting fires in the distance. Or the afterglow of explosions on the outskirts of town, if it ever came to that. The end of the world indeed, thought Davis, unable to coax even the wryest of smiles out of his lips. Pulling up a news website on the computer, he noticed another item on the Saddam Hussein video that had surfaced. He selected the link and the set of images began to move across the screen. But the film wasn't how he remembered it, this one grainy and at times indecipherable, especially compared to the earlier, official release of the execution. It seemed to have been shot on a cell phone. Davis leaned closer so his face was only a few inches from the screen. This time he saw a staircase leading up to a loft with crude lighting, mostly aided by camera flashes going off in the direction of the dictator's head. The men in hoods were there around him passing a thick rope with a wide noose, but the din made it obvious there were many others in the room. He is wearing an overcoat and they move him forward and he is speaking and they are taunting. The dictator replies calmly, his voice unwavering, the white subtitles at the bottom of the screen translating: Is that how you show your bravery as men? Straight to hell, one of the onlookers says back. Another says—appealing to general decency—Please, I'm begging you, a man is being executed. And the dictator begins to exalt Allah but in mid-sentence the trapdoor opens and he drops straight through the loft, and then all is dark. The pitch blackness is evenly interrupted by a mass passing in front of it, back and forth like a giant swinging arm. And then a shot of the face, initially illuminated as if severed and floating on its own. The neck is lolled over, snapped so that the head is at a complete ninety degree angle to the body, and

its eyes are half open. The mouth somewhere between a grimace and a true smile. And to Davis something in the floating face, despite its beard and ugliness and the terrible man behind it, looked strangely feminine. Gleeful chaos breaks out, every man in the room is raising his voice in rapture. It is as if they are shouting down a hail of gunfire. The noose's knot is ten times the width of the rope, as large as the man's head.

The film ended at just under three minutes and Davis began playing it again. He looked for the old pack of cigarettes and found it mercilessly empty on the floor. He watched the affair again and wondered if his mother was in the same place as the dictator. Or was she taunting him from somewhere. No, that seemed backwards. But, he thought, what about that man's family, for God's sake? Davis bit his knuckle hard. He continued to replay the clip, as if it was running on a loop, well over an hour, and he felt like he would keep at it endlessly. For the more Davis watched the more he felt like a witness, and each time the dictator dropped through the hole in the floor Davis saw with greater conviction his mother passing from one place to the next. And as he sat there at the desk he began to weep without end at the sight of that particular loss, of the man dropping through, and in his misted vision the snowflakes through the window looked bigger and so much more than just snow. And, not for the last time, it touched on Davis like a quick tap to the crown of his head that Vera was truly, irretrievably gone, and without looking too far at what he had left in life he could be certain of a bleak era dawning. Yet he stood up wiping his eyes and looked to the door, for that same tap left him wondering if there was some way he might hold shape to the outline she had left behind.

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As he navigated the old Impala down the slippery, snow-blanketed street away from the house, Jacob was thinking about revenge. There were pictures taken, after all, compromising, indicting ones. He'd wanted more than an affair for some time but he was already spinning his tires, gaining no purchase with her, and now he was stuck, with nothing. Why does everything go so badly? Jacob thought. As if reading his thoughts, or at least his face, Mats croaked up in the passenger seat, "At least you still have me to boss around." Jacob looked over to see him swigging the Glenfiddich bottle taken from the house, and he felt a reluctant yet comforting feeling that he would be near this man, probably for the duration of his years. But his brother didn't help matters when it came to Monica, and Jacob knew he would push off from him if it meant somehow gaining her. Yet he was growing surly with the hypothetical notion that there could be a choice to make, that she wouldn't just join him, join them. And why did their older brother have to leave in the first place, Jacob wondered. Before he did there was a balance that allowed Jacob to concentrate more on Monica. He was brimming with blame and wanted to lay it at her feet.

Jacob held out his gloved hand and received the bottle. After taking a slug he cleared his throat. "Listen, carefully. Do you still have those shots of me and my friend on your digital?"

His brother's eyes widened as if to capture something, and then narrowed. "Of course. I keep everything for posterity, not that it will make a difference in the aftermath."

"We're going to deliver a package that will make happy families think twice. To Davis with love." Jacob took an exclamatory gulp of scotch, and its bravado burned all the way down his throat.

His brother sighed strangely for one who never tires of schemes, of talking, of merely being conscious. "Jacob? I want to state that this might be the last. You can't implicate me in your petty designs anymore, and they are petty. If I can level with you? Jacob? I want to work. I'm good at my job and I want to perform it regularly. I don't know how your books are balancing but my cupboard's emptier than contemporary morality, and I think you're starting to slip. Me, I want to go out on a high."

After a pause he thought was a cue, Jacob laughed from his very heart, squealing as they glided beneath a red light and down the next street. But he realized he was the only one making a sound above the soft crunch beneath the tires, and when he caught his brother's gaze it seemed to hold concern and damnation at once. Then it was Jacob who carefully listened, to his brother sighing again, as the swollen snowflakes licked quietly at the windshield and did their best not to melt against the heat of the glass. "You know," said his brother, "there are morgues all over the world that are full to the brim and turning good people away."

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It was past four in the morning when Davis stepped into the kitchen. He leaned on the counter of the island where Monica stood. "You're awake," he said.

"Yeah," she replied, gently. "I am. We need to deal with her," she said, pointing at the ceiling. "I don't think I'll sleep until we do."

"Well, there's something I need to say first." Davis's voice had a tremor in it. "Something that was between Vera and me."

"Oh." Without a doubt Monica understood what had arrived. Recovering herself, she got closer and carefully loosened his tie, then undid his top button. Next she put her arms around him and spoke slowly into his ear, her voice raspy and faltering. "What your father did. Davis. My love." And as her husband's body buckled Monica held it firmly, looking over his shoulder out the window at the whiteout desert that once was their backyard. It looked like a place to get lost in, to forage blindly. No matter what the worn-out year still held, she felt like the new one had already started, and she said, by way of greeting, "Good of you to come."

Windows

Buckner pulls up on the knob and throws his hip into the heavy front door as if he is breaking into his own house. The door un-jams and the front hall shudders, rattling the generic landscape prints hung close together on the wall, plaster cracks connecting them. Lights are on within and a wave of irritation spreads through him. In the kitchen he finds Lacey and Liam at the table. Lacey absorbed in a calculator on top of an open scribbler, a *Journeys in Math* text at her elbow, Liam piling empty Tetra Paks in the middle of the table and opening more.

–Hi Buckner, Lacey says without looking.

–Buckner, says Liam.

He looks at them and bites his lip. Knows better than to try and hug them. Like their mother, they can recoil at the slightest, uninitiated touch, if it doesn't comply with their moods. At the sink, which has a nagging drip he thought fixed last week, he pulls the industrial orange powder from beneath and begins working on his hands. The grease, paint like rust under the nails.

–What happened to Baba's? He is back late and was to pick them up at his mother's where they were to eat.

–Mom said we didn't have to, Liam puts in between draws on his newest drink box. Buckner's wife and mother haven't exactly gotten along since his mother diagnosed her with 'nerves.' Now Lacey glances at Buckner, as if waiting for his reaction. He steadies his face.

–Nothing we could eat there anyway, she says. His mother is from a faraway place and serves more traditional dishes, dishes of meat, that his children as vegetarians can't have. Won't have.

–And where is Mrs. Buckner?

–Mom's out back.

–Hey, if I'm Buckner then she's Mrs. Buckner, you got that? His voice sounds harsh suddenly, so he improvises a laugh.

Liam, whose back is to Buckner, cocks his head to the side as if considering. Straightening, he stabs a straw through the foil hole-cover of another juice and says, No, she's out back. The faucet drips. Lacey surveys Buckner, waiting for the next outburst. As if he is the child. She goes back to punching numbers.

He walks down the back steps, avoiding the broken plank, and trudges over un-raked leaves, the first batch fallen, to the garage on the alley. He climbs up to the sunken roof where white plastic chairs sit among potted pansies, cinnamon basil, indeterminate varieties of tomato bereft of fruit, the yields of summer a fast-fading memory. He thought she would be up here, where he has been finding her lately, smoking and reading. Now the smell of barbecued meat pulls him to the far edge of the garage top. A small but lively party is in progress across the alley, beneath the freshly renovated palatial two-storey. Little marble statues of gargoyles and dwarves placed here and there on the carefully manicured grass. Their human counterparts clustered in little groups with wineglasses, some on lawn chairs with paper plates. Tending the grill by the house is the old man Buckner recognizes, white hair and

beard. A huge, towering man, a stomach you could lose your fist in. On midsummer nights, the few this year that were warm enough, Buckner and Randa would drink on the garage and watch the old man and his grandmotherly wife pickling in their hot tub or towing their poodles around the hedges. Kris Kringle, he called the man. And the Mrs. and those jerry-curl discount reindeer. Randa would laugh.

The old man prods the grill, addressing two women who stroll out of the house. The old wife followed by a younger, taller woman. It takes Buckner another moment to realize the latter is *his* wife. Randa takes the old woman in her arm as they stand laughing at something the old man is saying. A man about Buckner's age with slicked hair and a tie approaches, shaking hands with each of them. Buckner watches Randa flash him a toothy grin. It seems like she is putting on a bit of a show and, in the same moment, he begins to feel like he is spying. The old man drops steak and foiled potato onto a paper plate and hands it to the newcomer, then points to some other guests who are without food. Randa looks and appears to catch Buckner on the garage in her gaze. He waves, awkwardly shrugging, but she is quickly engaged with something the old woman is saying, as if she doesn't see him after all.

Doug and Joan are the first neighbours she's properly met in two years of living here in the Garneau neighbourhood. They are an old retired couple living a happily established retirement life. Randa has seen them from a distance for a while a now. The woman gardening on her knees as the man stands over her pointing this and that out with his cane, giving directions, their dogs lounging behind them on the

uniformly sparkling grass. She's seen them returning arm-in-arm from late evening walks, him kissing her on the cheek as she goes in the back door, leaving him to ponder a cigar at the picnic table. The flare of the cigar's tip as he puffed was a secret comfort sent across the alley to Randa in the dark. But tonight they had spotted her on the garage and beckoned her over to join their barbeque party.

She declines the steak but digs through a baked potato and sips red wine as the old couple ask her questions. Ones that normally annoy her but coming from them she doesn't mind, even enjoys answering. Why doesn't she eat meat; does she have kids; what does her husband do; was she born here and does she like the city; when will she have more kids.

Quickly Randa feels a familial trust with them, almost a belonging, that she can't explain. She wants to tell them more but is afraid of spewing all kinds of personal fuselage, about Buckner and the kids, about life in that house, about her breakdowns, the recent episodes of compulsive shaking. Shakedowns, Buckner labeled them in the fair-weather remissions between. Her body touched with vibrations, convoluted messages from hidden quarters, in the car, on the couch, at the table, in the shower, picking the kids up at school, in bed. One, sometimes two hours of sporadic shaking. As if little faults divided the flesh from her jaw down to her ankles. *It's nerves*, her mother-in-law had told Buckner, unaware Randa was listening from the next room. *She has the sickness with the nerves.* But to Randa there is no real illness, she just finds it impossible to keep still when nothing ever changes.

After they introduce her to a few guests, Joan takes her on a tour of the house she has admired from a distance so often. Unlike Randa's, the house is a typical structure of the gentrified neighbourhood. There is a polished look to everything, high ceilings, spacy bedrooms, bright kitchen, bookshelf-lined study, sunroom added on the front. Joan tells Randa that she is welcome at the house any time. They've seen her across the alley before and Doug has said how she reminds him of their daughter who had died years earlier in the Maritimes.

–He has a sense for these things, Joan announces as they go back outside.

–Mom gave you a good look, did she? Doug says from the barbeque, a grin muscling through his snowy beard. Don't be a'tall shy in the future. We could use the company always. God knows we love a good visit.

–And your little ones, Joan puts in. Bring them over so we can get acquainted. Your hubby too, of course.

–Buckner's not much of a socialite, but that's very kind. You've both been so kind to me tonight.

–It's nothing, he says. Now, you go mingle with your own age group. We've trapped you long enough. But Randa, he says with a wink. You come to us for anything. Anything a'tall.

She blushes and takes leave of them after chatting another minute and meeting a man who arrived late. Then she meets many of the others, mostly neighbours from that side of the alley. By the time she excuses herself and crosses over to her yard it is getting dark. She's been gone well over an hour. The glass-shard stucco of her house slows her pace as she makes her way over the stirring sea of leaves. She

considers the visible concrete block foundation of the back porch, lopsidedly sinking at a corner and crumbling throughout. It looks unsafe even. This is where the kids will grow up, and for what? For Buckner and his pride? He thinks it more stoic, his view on life. *This is what you want, this is what you get instead, so deal with it.* She recognizes it as pride, though, inherited from his mother who is a tight-lipped, condescending old woman. His mother thinks of Randa as a late-blooming hippie who doesn't know how to properly raise children and has too many independent, un-wifely ways about her.

Inside she finds Buckner nursing a beer and watching television with the lights out. It is a reality show, the kind she hates, this one pitting contestants against each other to see who can conceptualize the most important and probable charity foundation –inner city, breast cancer, Third World, or otherwise. The winner at the end of the show receives two million dollars, half to create the charity and half for their pocket. Randa curls up beside him on the couch. She can tell he is making an effort to look engrossed with the show, trying not to give her a peripheral glance.

–Made friends tonight, she says, playing her fingers on his knee. That older couple out back.

–Maybe we could do this show, he says. Maybe send a tape in, get on it next season.

–As charity cases, you mean? Recipients? Buckner, somehow I don't think Struggling Wasps Falling Through Cracks will sell.

–As contestants, God! I could get us that money. And the charity. And you forget I'm Catholic, Christ, among other things. He pushes her hand off his knee and produces another beer from beside the couch.

–What else are you?

–What? It's what else you forget, or neglect. It's our kids going without supper.

–That, she says. She begins to wonder who will get off the couch first, which one will concede and go to bed waiting for the other.

–My mother called. Said you no-showed. Pulled the big no-show again. He mouths 'no-show' a final time.

–The kids and I were fine. We can manage without your mother. Am I betrothed to your mother? Do I want to sit in her sub-zero apartment and watch her tsk over my children for turning down her carp and lentil slop? For choking on that stale black bread she keeps? She knows, Buckner, she *knows* we don't eat meat.

–I eat it, and I'm doing fine. Fact I'm the only normal one under this roof. Your parents eat it. Used to grow it specifically to be eaten.

This is true. True but unfair, she thinks. Him invoking her parents for a cheap shot. She lifts off the couch and raises her palm to the cool stick of the window looking out onto the yard. She grew up on a farm, some cows and pigs. Mostly chickens, though. *Doing the chickens* was a festive, annual occasion. Being the oldest, she was her dad's chief assistant and an expert anywhere on the line. From reaching into the warm body and pulling out the gizzard to boiling and blowtorching, from plucking stubborn feathers to steadying scrawny (yet oddly form-fitting) necks

between nails hammered onto a knee-high chopping block. At ten she was already wielding the axe. Tossing the flailing headless bodies into the makeshift holding pen. Wings still pumping, the bodies' lift and return to earth gave their last moments a chaotic gracefulness untainted by the projecting blood. At fourteen she hunted exclusively, letting her brothers occupy most of the 'doing' while she went about finding the chickens that were ready to go. Many would hide in the abandoned school bus behind the barn, as if all the shit and feathers within would provide sufficient camouflage. She could track and seize the stealthiest, hold her grip on the most recalcitrant, her forearms swollen with bites and pecks.

But by seventeen something had changed. Hunting, killing, and preparing the chickens, and quickly farm life itself, became banal in its crudeness. She saw a fate, a poor rural fate, for her on the chopping block. A common destiny with the chickens.

Getting out, away to school, turned out to be simpler than she imagined. Before long it was Edmonton, university, then Buckner. And she was curious about him from the first night they met, registered something different about this man so quiet among his rowdy friends at the bar. This unruly-haired man that stared, mouth set, paused and contemplated her an extra few beats every time she saw him, sometimes to the point that she mistook his ardour for a kind of slowness. But soon she knew his quiet, steady gaze was raw intention, he had intentions for her back then, even as her friends mocked and laughed at the 'recurring mute,' as they had labeled him. And after being simply needed all her life on the farm as part of the family, being wanted instead, with equal fervour, drew her to him. They became

fixtures in each other's lives and in the unaccountable space of three years she had escaped one family to found another.

Now she leans her brow against the windowpane looking out back.

–Can you check on them? he says, amicably now, meaning the kids. They want you to read to them, only you.

–I imagined something else, she speaks into the glass.

–Randa. *Raandaa.* We can do that after.

She begins grinding her teeth, holds herself so she won't start shaking. *We can do that after.*

–You know, she says, Doug and Joan lost one of their children. A woman by then, I guess. Said I reminded them of her. Everyone thinks outliving your child is terrible but if you had the choice, say you knew they would die either way, wouldn't you want to go on?

–Who?

–What.

–Who are we even talking about?

–The neighbours, Buckner!

–The neighbours. That's great, Randa. You do know our kids are still living, right?

With Buckner working, sometimes two jobs, she has raised the kids mostly on her own, and they do favour her. But she didn't ask for their devotion. She turns and walks past him into the hallway, tries to steady her quivering so the kids won't notice.

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Through their window Randa can see her own garage. She sits huddled in the warmth of Doug and Joan's kitchen, sipping hot chocolate. She is telling them things, intimate things. How she's been away from university for ten years, degree still unfinished. How she feels so removed from life, detached, watching herself make ends meet. *Watching Buckner make ends meet.* Ridiculous, she thinks. These people were strangers a week ago and now I'm subjecting them to all my dirty laundry.

–Now, now, Doug says, folding her hand in his. There's something behind all of this, he says. She feels apprehensive as Joan takes her other hand. The elderly couple communicates with glances across the table, Randa in between. The thing is, Doug begins.

–Yes, the thing, Joan adds.

–The thing, and we hope this isn't too presumptuous, but we've prepared a little something for you. He wrinkles around the eyes and Joan begins nodding. When Brenda died–our daughter Brenda, that is–the insurance company paid out a modest package. And free spirit that she was–God rest her soul–well, she was unattached and the sum went to us. Joan sighs a bit and nods her head so he will continue. Now, most of it's tied up in this and that right now, but we thought, we just knew somehow, it would be fitting if you had this… He produces an envelope from his back pocket and nudges it over the table. Make use of it however you see fit.

She turns it over in her hands. The envelope thick with bills. There must be over two thousand here, she says, eyeballing the twenties. She wonders what they might want in return.

–No strings attached, dear, Joan says as if reading her face.

–I couldn't, Randa says. I can't. This is yours.

–You can, Doug says, squeezing her hand, a scowl of concern creeping over his face. In fact you must. Consider it a special fund just for you. Starting Over money.

–It's just, I don't know when I could repay you, and it's not like we're starving…

Suddenly he cries out, Why won't you let us provide for you? He is astonished and looking wounded. He heaves his bulging torso up and slowly manoeuvres away from the table. His tone a lecture. Don't you trust us? For the love of Pete! He waddles out of the room.

Shocked, Randa realizes for the first time, caught so off-guard, that they really are strangers to her still. She trusts them in a way, yet it's apparent she doesn't know them. But doesn't everyone trust without knowing at some point in their lives? Isn't that her marriage and family life, after all? Her children trust her blindly.

–Now you've upset him, Joan says. Just take it. Make it up to him. She pats the envelope.

–I wasn't trying to be rude, Randa says.

–Just take it, Joan repeats, rising. But I think you'd better go now. Papa! she calls, grabbing his cane and going after him, leaving Randa alone.

She sits another minute, tempted to stay and clear this up with them somehow, but also to provoke a reaction to her disobedience, her refusal to take the money, her refusal to leave. She wants to see more, close-up, of these people she's been

observing for so long. How peculiar Doug was, as if he had so much invested in her. The envelope catches her eye. She turns it over in her hands, liking the weight of it. It makes a decent thwack when she drops it on the table. Suddenly she wonders at her being there at all. She folds the money into her pocket, calls out 'Goodbye, then,' and leaves.

Buckner is exhausted returning home. He thinks he might be getting sick. The house was built the same year as the hospital two blocks down, 1923, and a draft comes through every door and window. They are the original paper-thin pushup windows that run on ropes anchored by hidden weights in the wall. Nothing to insulate them. On the way home from work he picked up some window plastic that resembles a giant roll of saran wrap, to provide a trap for all the cold air slipping in. He starts to work right away, lining up the adhesive on the windowsill in the living room. After a few minutes a squeal interrupts him. He is home late, his weekly overtime shift, and thought everyone was in bed already. He was so preoccupied with the windows that he hasn't checked on the kids. Another squeal, then laughter and a shriek. The sound of water sloshing about. He treads down the hall and sees the strip of light under the bathroom door. All movement within ceases. He hesitates and then knocks.

–Hello in there, he says.

–Enter at your own risk, Liam's voice comes back from within. Buckner opens the door to find his children in the tub, Lacey wearing a crown of bubbles and Liam reclining between her outstretched legs.

–C'mon, Buckner, says Lacey seriously. A little privacy please.

–What is this, says Buckner.

–We're saving water by bathing together, Lacey quips. Plus Liam's still afraid of showering.

He bends over the tub and grabs his son under the arms, hoisting him out onto the bathmat. I think not. I think you're too old to have bath-time together.

–*Buckner*, cries Liam. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

–Don't give me that, you monkey, says Buckner, dropping a towel on Liam's head.

–Did you know, Lacey chides, that conserving water is one of the top environmental priorities your children will face in their lifetime? California ran out recently. A water crisis.

–More crisis's to come, says Liam.

–*Crises*, you idiot, Lacey corrects, slapping the frothy water so that it careens off the tub sides in front of her.

–I don't care, Buckner enunciates slowly. You're too old for this. It's not right.

–Mom said it's natural, Liam pleads, making a move to step back in. The capital of California is Sacramento.

–Where is she? Buckner asks, not getting a reply. If you don't tell me I'll have a crises of my own.

–Crisis, Lacey mutters. Buckner sends Liam out the door. He stands over his daughter.

–Where?

–She said she wouldn't be gone long. He is almost in the hallway when Lacey takes up one of her current affected voices. Buckner. Be an accommodating parent and pass me my bathrobe, would you? He unhooks it from the door and pauses, realizing he's never seen it before. It feels silky.

–This is new, he says softly. She is unsuccessful at wrapping a towel around her head. She grimaces at its unraveling, fed up with the limitations of a nine-year old body.

–Mom took us shopping today. Liam and myself made sensible purchases only, I assure you. Her upper lip glistens. She winks at him.

What kids I have, Buckner thinks. They really are something. And he thinks at this moment he might love his little humans more than he ever has, and that he couldn't possibly love them more than this.

He starts to insulate the bedroom windows, planning to wait calmly for Randa's return, but halfway through he quits. He goes up onto the garage. Again she isn't there. The neighbours' yard is lit with tiki-torches. As he walks to the edge for a better look, Buckner knows what he has already surmised. Randa and her new friends, plus another old couple, in the wood-paneled hot tub against the house. Clothes litter the perimeter. Looks like they're having a good time, glasses and bottles lining the edge of the octagon-shaped jacuzzi. He tries to pick her voice out of the chatting and laughter but can't, or he doesn't recognize it. He can see her bare shoulders above the edge. He climbs down and begins to cross the alley.

What indifference, he thinks. She is indifferent to their life now, to their children. But the worst thing is he couldn't dream of detaching so easily himself. He'd love to lose all of it, some days. Looking out for his mother, raising the kids, keeping the lines open with Randa. Leaky basement, peeling paint, fridge on the fritz. Late payments looming, loans, interest paid on interest. He can't actually separate from these things. I am these things, he thinks. Randa can shelve it all in a second and I sit there worrying about how old is too old for kids to bathe together. Maybe he'll tell her that he's leaving, for a night of recklessness at least. He swings the gate set in the hedges and measures his steps over the neighbours' lawn.

The poodles spot him first, begin yelping from inside, falling over each other against the window from the back of a couch. The hot tub becomes quiet except for the old man, Doug, hollering at the dogs to settle down, which they don't. Randa explodes with laughter and the rest join in at a muted frequency.

–Hey! Buckner! sings Randa as he approaches. He can tell when she's had too much. When she has a few she becomes abstract. Philosophical, he calls it.

–Can I speak to you, he says, waving at them all with one hand and gesturing to the alley with the other. She raises a martini glass.

–The floor is yours.

–So you're the famous Buckner, says Doug behind a fresh swath of steam. He braces himself against the edge and lets out a long painful sigh, as if a muscle is torn, hoisting his body up. He is naked and enormous, spotted pink skin and flesh folds. Sagging breasts like pathetic shamed animals, baby seals cowering on his

prehistoric boulder of a stomach. Feel like I could write your biography, I've heard so much, he says, parting the moisture with a massive sweaty hand.

–Hi, says Buckner as they shake, trying not to stare at the sheer girth of his neighbour, bristling at his nakedness. Listen, thanks for entertaining my wife. Randa, we have to go.

–Let's talk here, Buckner.

–I haven't introduced my other half, says Doug.

–No, not here. In private.

–It can wait, Buckner.

–Or the Paulsons, says Doug. The other seniors have permanent grins on their faces, as if sedated by the steam.

–Now, Randa. Let's go.

–Don't make me release the hounds, says Doug, chuckling. Really, though, all due respect, but I'm betting Randa is okay to decide herself.

–I'll be home soon, hon, I will.

–You ought to join us, young man, says Joan. These jets'll work wonders.

Buckner glares at Randa in disbelief. He feels impulsive, and his impulse is to throw one of the garden gnomes into the jacuzzi. Perhaps a gargoyle from the lawn. Coax a tidal wave over her little geriatric gathering. How can she be so obtuse when their entire life is capsizing? He is losing his grip on who she is, and when exactly this person split off from who she was. The uncertainty is jagged, stoking coals arbitrarily, ruthlessly in his stomach. He is definitely coming down with something.

He turns away from the hot tub, for some reason thinking of the first time they slept together. Her cramped dorm room at the university. The Swiss Army knife he peeled an orange with at her desk after they got back from the campus pub. The segment of fruit passed from her mouth to his. Hold your breath, she had told him, and for every ten seconds an article of clothing will be removed.

He takes a gulp of air and walks toward a mean little gargoyle on the lawn. Seventy seconds in he was near unconscious, ready to burst, when only her bra and panties remained. Then she jumped at him, taking them down onto her tiny single bed so that his gigantic exhale coincided with her wrenching off his clothes, subsided into gasping which in turn became coughing that she tenderly hushed.

The gargoyle has pointed ears and Buckner upends it easily, kicking its ugly head. It falls back stiffly, like a cartoon, makes a swish against the grass. When he didn't have her arms above her head she clung to his ears as they went back and forth. Citrus from his hands and lips and tongue mingling with her smell. She was like no one. Possessed such a gratitude, an energy as if everything she experienced was intrinsically new and should be welcomed.

–Hey. Wait a second, Doug says as Buckner walks toward the alley. Hey, that's an assault on my property. Buckner keeps going. This is an affront, sir. Stop where you are, the old man hollers, still standing naked in his hot tub, but Buckner isn't turning around.

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It must have been the water. She hasn't been this drunk in, well, it's been months. All that sitting in the hot water. Randa is astonished at her own drunkenness. Pleased that she has reached this level. She takes the porch stairs on all fours and receives a long splinter in the heel of her palm. I'll have to replace their vodka, she thinks. Her jeans and shirt cling to her still-wet body. Her bra slung over her shoulder. Sat in that thing too long. Now my flesh is soft, susceptible. She winces at the splinter's deep lodging beneath the skin as she goes inside.

The lights are out. She considers waking the kids to show them her injury. Liam, at least, would still be impressed. Often she wishes they could skip the next dozen years and be adults already, but tonight she has the urge to rouse them and make sure they haven't changed. Not one iota. Nobody says 'iota' anymore. Her father always did though. She drags herself along the hallway wall, knocking her knees twice. She thinks, Now I've given myself away. But who cares if Buckner hears, after the performance he pulled tonight.

She swings into Liam's room to find an empty bed, army men and the old Rubik's cube, coloured squares peeling, in the wavy folds of his comforter. She whispers into his closet, peering in between the slats. *Liam.* Nothing. Randa flips on the light in Lacey's room across the hall. Empty. I feel just so, she thinks, at this disappearance of her own. She finds Buckner in their bedroom, several photo albums open on the duvet.

–The kids, she says.

–These ones? He flashes a picture of the four of them at Niagara Falls, leaning over the railing. Since when does it matter, he says to the picture.

–Did I dream that we had children? She sits on the bed. Look at this. She displays the splinter like a rare jewel.

–Sizeable, he says. They're tenting in the basement.

–On a school night, she moans, trying to push off to go see them but he grabs her arm and looks at her. Menace, she thinks, on his face, which shifts into something more benign as soon as she thinks it.

–Stay right there. He returns from the bathroom with tweezers and the brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide. Give me the run-down. On your day. Hold still. He takes her by the wrist and pauses with the shiny instrument.

–I watched my husband throw a fit. Be careful.

–I used to trust you.

–Like a child, throwing a tantrum in front of the neighbours. That hurts.

–And you trusted me, to keep us on our feet. He carefully digs in with the tips of metal, parting torn skin to easily locate the intruder.

She thinks, I'm no match for him tonight, already half-relieved to play the wounded patient. You should really meet him sometime, my husband. She touches his neck with her free hand. Do it quickly, for my sake.

–I see the kids have new clothes.

–Buckner. You never change, Buckner! The last creature on earth to adapt.

–Think you've been holding out on me, Randa. Stashing. She laughs, shaking, wishing she'd kept on drinking. Keep still.

He slowly retracts the wood from her palm, a pleasurable icy pain in its wake. He holds it in the tweezer grip above their heads, to the light. When Buckner fixates

on something it's as if they are in the past, the way they were. Randa thinks it looks like a little bayonet. He turns his hand and the tweezers flash morse code reflections of light. The splinter drops, landing on a picture of Lacey just after her first ballet recital, face glaring directly out, as if the pink tutu was funeral wear. Buckner twists open the bottle and a chemical steam plumes upward, like he is taking the cap off a radiator. Her nose wrinkles and she starts to chuckle.

–We should have left that in me. My skin would grow over it. A souvenir of the time the house bit me.

–This will sting, considerably, says Buckner, swabbing from the bottle.

–It's H_2O_2, really . *Dihydrogen dioxide.* But the people, the non-science people, the laymen, they changed it to Hydrogen Peroxide.

–I'm taking the kids to my mother's. He lowers the searing cotton onto her exit wound, which was also the point of entry.

–A selling point: remove the 'die' and it sounds much friendlier. *Ahh.*

–For a few days.

–What? She thinks that he is so smug in this moment, so in control, untouchable. If this is about money, Buckner, I'll return it. Not that it's any of your business.

–Return it?

–I had a deal. With the neighbours. An *understanding.*

He blushes. We don't need fucking handouts. He jumps off the bed and walks into the bathroom. The cabinet door slams.

–It wasn't for 'us,' she yells.

He reappears, vigorously brushing his teeth. Don't go over there anymore. I'm asking you not to go. We'll sort this. He points his toothbrush at her.

–They're not leaving, not to your mother's.

–It's already arranged.

She pounds the mattress. You want to deliver our children into the hands of a crazy woman…

–Randa. He flips the light switch. Sleep it off, Randa.

–She thinks I'm mentally damaged, Buckner, because I don't eat meat. That bitch.

–She means well. He gets into bed, under the covers weighed down here and there by the albums. Don't ever say that again. You want to talk crazy. You took money from total strangers. Maybe she's onto something.

Randa feels ready to burst. She is steadily drunk standing at the window in the dark, but it's a knife-thrust of longing that is making her positively nauseous. She badly wants something to make sense. For a moment she can't understand how she got here, what hidden cues orchestrated her arrival in this moment. This isn't at all what she imagined. She succumbs to twitching at the window. If she could just hold still. Or get some air. She thinks to open the window, but her hands crumble against an invisible resistance and bounce back. She tries again to no avail, the sound of a low drum as she hits the plastic stretched taut. It seems to her the house has developed a soft yet resilient inner webbing, and she's trapped. It's growing over, sealing her in, and she begins shaking with claustrophobic urgency, drowning in the full moonlight caught between the glass and the plastic. The stuttering illumination

catches the corner of the bed and a few loose vacation photos, troubling boats and causing horizons to waver.

The note says *Gone for cigarettes*, a burning cigarette with an anxious filter-face drawn around the words. Buckner got back half an hour ago. He begins to wonder when the message was left. The kids are at his mother's so the house is empty. Just him and the little yellow post-it on the kitchen table. He stares at it, as if superstitious, afraid to displace it. He feels that he and Randa have made progress in their two days alone. She's been quiet mostly, sure, but the bouts of shaking have subsided. And she promised to give the neighbours their money back. He wanted to talk to them but she assured him that she could handle it, that he had to start trusting her again, sometime.

They painted Liam's room, labouring to turn fire engine red into the 'creamy avocado' he'd been requesting. They layered so many thick coats the room looked positively smaller, she'd said. They also cleaned, endlessly, scouring the house room by room and talking about the future.

The phone rings and Buckner figures it's Lacey or Liam, or his mother wanting rid of them by now.

–Hello, Buckner here.

–Hi, friend, a voice booms. It's Doug speaking, from across the way. Buckner says nothing. I need to come by, friend, and pick up a few things. Brenda's things.

–Brenda? Is this supposed to be funny? Listen, you've messed around enough.

–Not a'tall funny, sir. Quite a serious matter, actually. She doesn't exactly feel, oh, *comfortable* coming back into your home. So she's asked me to retrieve a few essentials. With your supervision, of course.

–Pass Randa the phone. He runs to the window but can't make out any figures in the neighbours' windows.

–Oh, she's much too excited already, to do any talking.

–If she's there you'll put her on the telephone.

–I can grant no such thing, unfortunately…

Buckner hangs up and strides out the back door in his bare feet, adrenaline coursing through his body, pinching his bones awake. He can't believe it. They must have tricked her into going over. Must have gotten her riled up. He jumps onto their gate and easily swings down, landing on the red brick path leading to the house. The hot tub seems to be on full blast, a cauldron bubbling smoke into the already foggy autumn evening. The gargoyle he upset is standing again. Buckner presses the doorbell several times. The poodles yelp and snarl from inside, making an unholy ruckus. He hears other movement, human noises, but there is no answer. A few moments pass. The side of his big toe bleeds. A piece of glass he must have stepped on in the alley. He watches a reservoir of blood well up after wiping his toe on the brick. He tries the doorknob but it's locked, so he begins slamming his fists and knees and feet into the door. Randa. *Randa.* The dogs are shrieking now. He is so focused that he doesn't see Doug appear from the side of the house, carefully walking

around the hot tub. Buckner is pounding and making threats when his back receives a forceful poke from the butt of Doug's cane. He pivots to find the old man leaning at him from a foot away, taller than he remembers. Probably half past six foot, he thinks. Doug looks at him like he's weighing how to contain something.

–This is animal behaviour, says Doug. This won't do.

Buckner steps away from the door, holding his arm out toward it. Go ahead. Open it, he says through his teeth. I want you to know that she's in a bad way, my marriage is fucking fragile right now, and you're shaking the box. So let her out.

–Don't threaten me, says Doug. Brenda doesn't want out. Tell me why she would? The way you treat her. Look at what you put her through…

–Brenda? Buckner yells. Put her through!

–She's filled us in plenty, on the hopelessness you make her wallow in. It's what separates us–hope. Separates us from the animals. Without it we're no better.

The old man has flipped, thinks Buckner. I have hope, you nutter.

–Yes, I'm sure you're bursting with it, says Doug, now blocking the door with resolve. Brenda…

–Randa!

–Yes, well, *Randa* has carte blanche, she knows that. She'll come out if and when.

–You want hopeless, says Buckner. There's not a hope in hell I'm leaving. He sits down on the walk, drawing up his knees. He stretches and yawns. The dogs are suddenly mute. Only the jacuzzi bubbles under the silence. Buckner catches a glimpse of Randa, with Joan watching from the window. A curtain is drawn in front

of them and he can't discern her expression. In fact I'll just camp out here, he announces, raising his voice, loud enough for Randa to hear. He reclines, stretching out, laying down so that his head rests on the crisp fall grass that is like stubble. You'll have to call the police if you don't like it.

–Oh, get up already, the old man yells hoarsely, prodding Buckner with his cane. Buckner curls into a fetal pose. Get up, I said.

Buckner thinks in this moment that he really can stay here on the ground forever, that in the long run it won't make too much of a difference. If only he can lie very, very still. Eventually he will be a fossil, returned to the ground. So he means it when he rolls onto his back again and quietly says, I'm staying right here. I couldn't possibly hope to get up. But Doug is staring off somewhere beyond him and doesn't seem to hear. His face has become the white of his beard.

–Come down from there, he yells. From the ground Buckner traces Doug's line of sight, until he is looking upside down at the trees around his own garage, where the fog has lifted. But he can't comprehend what he is seeing. Liam's small head and shoulders suspended among the branches, hooting, mouth frozen wide open in ecstasy. The raucous, levitating bust of his own son. Buckner and Doug exchange glances of disbelief. And the floating vision sends Buckner rolling, instinctively, lifts him up in the exact moment a strong wind arrives to swat down a branch in front of the garage. From his feet Buckner sees a clearing, a window between waving branches, and now his son is an actual fleshy creature, wearing ninja pajamas, perched on top of Lacey's shoulders, her arms locked tightly around his legs. They are watching from the edge of the garage top, jubilant, untamable, cheering. Liam

waves. Hey, Buckner, he yells. We escaped. Just come back now. We've been waiting for you, Lacey sings. Buckner stands staring at them, forgetting the neighbours' house behind him, unaware of the yard he is in. He does not realize he is off the ground himself. The wind picks up and he carries toward them, wondering how on earth his little ones got home.

The Smallest Bones

When will you come home? Silvia Bearing's hands are lost in my hair. Navigating the scalp, they scoop up fistfuls, orienting length. You're long overdue, says Silvia. The spray bottle belches mist. The comb's teeth guiding cool wet strands over the tops of my ears. The wake of fingers and moisture is a sedative. I am sliding out of myself, negotiating consciousness on a chair in the middle of the kitchen, newspaper spread under my feet. Covering pieces of headlines with my toes, altering world events with the slightest tap. The hypnotic snip of scissors. Don't know how you walk around with this mop in your eyes, she says, the comb between her teeth. A painter needs to see, doesn't he?

No, no, I say, chuckling, puffing air out of my nostrils. A painter needs to feel. So they told me in junior high. High school, art school, MFA program. I don't feel much. Hey. Don't massacre the front, Silvia.

Don't be a paranoid, Mark. You'll feel like a new man when this is over.

Easy now, I say. Just a trim. Hey, maybe you could sit for me sometime.

The sun has turned the kitchen into a kiln. I could fall asleep any moment. When will you get home? Are you ever coming back? Sometimes I think you wouldn't at all if it wasn't for Robin. Silvia came to go over some work with you. I put the kettle on and she offered to cut my hair while we waited. Why do I talk differently when Silvia comes around, I am wondering. When do I ever say 'hey?' Silvia was an acquaintance of mine before you ever knew her, before you two began trading writing. She is mid-thirties but somehow retains these childish dimples. I like

people who stare unabashedly, like they can see something, right through me, and it's not hostile or pointy. Silvia is one of those. I like it that her inflection shifts gears, the vowel slowing down to a crawl, when she pronounces my name. She touches your elbow or wrist when you two are together, harping away, I've seen it so many times, a touch of emphasis, as if the thing she's telling you carries a kind of intimate urgency. The time you tried for that big government grant and persuaded her to apply as well, and she got it, the only one available. I need things, I mumble to her now. I want little things. A car that runs well. A consistently good week. A new city, sometimes. I'm not quite entirely, satisfied, you know, with things as they are.

She says, What, you don't like Edmonton? So typical. Wait, stop moving, Mark. Hold still. The moment—that should be sufficient. Need only what the moment offers. She leans over me, close, stomach grazing my shoulder, thick waves of suntan lotion rolling off her neck.

Like this moment? My eyes are closed. My head heavy, a sandcastle anticipating the tide. I begin to nod and she gasps, a sharp intake of breath. Her hand rests on my head, only for a couple of moments.

Christ, she says, I told you to keep still, and now I'm cut. She waves her hand in the air. Christ. At the sink she runs cold water over a fingertip. I touch my crown, where her hand paused, and find a smear of blood on my own finger. Silvia Bearing has bled onto my head, into my scalp.

I say, Is it serious?

She says, It's okay. This should staunch it, so I'll be fine. But don't get up and help or anything. She leans against the counter, clamping her fingertip with folded

paper towel, grinning. I hear the car pull up outside, the way you close the door gently, never slamming.

I say, I guess this means I'm anointed.

She says, You should be so lucky, you jerk. She beams her straight teeth at me.

I think luck and divinity operate in different realms. This, I think, was divined.

A divine moment, right, mocks Silvia. I just missed it though. I woke up in its aftermath. Silvia shakes a cigarette out with one hand and I hear you walk in the back door. She lights it and stares at the ember-end, switching to look at me gravely through the twist of smoke. Now something passes over her face and it settles, benignly, and she leans to study the postcards on the refrigerator door. There is something perfect about the slight ski-jump on the end of her nose. Something could have happened, couldn't it, this last half-hour, this last half-minute. I wish I had sharper, super-hearing, I might have heard you in the car two blocks away and had time to prepare, to make something happen. I want Silvia's finger on my tongue, against the roof of my mouth. I want to cauterize the wound at the precise moment of your arrival in the kitchen, so you can see that I have options too. That you can intend to leave, dead-set, but you'll be leaving a man with half a haircut and another woman's full embrace, minus one finger. A few drops of blood among the curls of hair on the newsprint.

You walk in with white plastic grocery bags and drop them on the table. You say, Well, you're a sight, aren't you, baby. And for some reason, the way you say it, your chuckle, this moment is a kind of proof, a negative of why we're still together.

It's often the littlest thing that draws us backward, into each other, and then we collide.

I say, Silvy here was just about to finish. You turn to see her, exhaling smoke, then grinning, almost bashfully. You hop over and hug her. I've watched this particular embrace so many times I have to look away.

Oh Silvia, you chime, so happy that she's here. What happened? You pull her hand to your face, blow on the finger, and press it to your glistening lips.

Volvo is renowned for making the world's safest automobiles. They crush on impact but the passengers remain untouched, a potato chip bag crumpling around them. Your Volvo that autumn in Jasper National Park. An official Scenic View rest stop on the way down Mount Edith Cavell at dusk. At a vista of neighbouring peaks, with nobody else in sight, tourist season well over, we started fooling around. You said you could hear water somewhere below. Your foot flat against the upholstery of the car roof, your bum on my thighs. Your leg a pillar, as if supporting the frame of the car. In the minute you came, a motorhome with Oregon plates veered into the lot, a slow lazy arc, just brushing our rear fender, the horrible scrape of metal on metal, enough to cause the car to lurch, nudging us half a foot into the guard rail. No crumple. I pulled up my jeans to go assure the motorhome driver we were fine, no damage done. You said, Don't leave me here. We were on a cliff's edge. You didn't want to die half-naked in the Volvo, smashed against boulders in the torrent somewhere below. I laughed. In the grainy dusk your anger seemed less vested, more playful. That crease in your brow could have been a put-on. The light made it seem

like all was scripted, we were just keeping to the necessary lines of a classic scene, and the roles would always be there for us to play. But it was only the light. Stepping outside, I could hear the water then, too.

When I got back in the car you wanted off of the mountain.

We are on the patio of Gallagher's Diner on the first day of May, three small storefronts away from the chic University crowd on the Third Fiddle patio, where they play the most unheard of college rock and turn a blind eye to smoking, which is prohibited everywhere else. It's swelling over there, peasant-like patchouli waifs in kerchiefs, young men in first full beards rubbing hands over laptops, and a sleeker jet-set bunch looking uniformly composed in their oversized sunglasses. Adam's PhD was Poli-Sci. Greg did Linguistics. The Fiddle is no longer their home. The yoga loft and cycle shop between are the barricades of our banishment. Once at the Diner, nothing separates one from 109th street, from being sucked deep into the south side or across the High Level Bridge to our capital city's desolate downtown and worse, beyond. No telling where you might put down roots, or how tiny the palette you wind up working with. At the youthful Fiddle the luxury of uncharted lives remains, beauty, trapped in the coalescing cloud of smoke above their heads.

Adam is half-cut at three in the afternoon, mucked with sweat, raising giant hands in our faces to make a point, elbows driving down on the flimsy yellow table, so that Greg and I have to rescue our beer before it all topples. Greg says, But it's irrelevant. Organized labour is being pushed to extinction. But that's not exactly going out on a limb. Adam is flabbergasted, defending his dire predictions. He is a

bulky man in a white shirt with a floral pattern stitched up to the slightly jaundiced collar. He says something about unions not evolving fast enough to keep up with corporatization, something about the sum of so many random parts. He looks at us and we steady ourselves, ready for this next volley of beer-soaked logic, me shifting in my seat and Greg tilting his head to one side. Adam's big paws go back up.

They are boring the hell out of me.

Last season's models are on sale in front of the bicycle shop. There's Robert, your Robert. The Magician, I would call him, the one who came before me—illusionist, you'd correct. You were in some kind of love with him. He had you hypnotized, I would tell you, under an evil spell. He's checking the shocks on a racing bike; he lifts the frame with two fingers, glances up and winks at me. Lets the bike drop. He looks beyond me, shading his eyes, then walks into the store. Hey, Mr. Mark. A voice from the sidewalk. I look behind me—Silvia Bearing is at the patio gate. I hop up immediately. She's wearing a black tank-top, squinting at me doubtfully. She sticks her head between the wrought-iron bars as far as it will go. Hey, you.

Join us, I say, cocking my head.

Can't.

Come on, Bearing. One drink and you're off the hook. I mouth *please* and thumb back toward my friends. I yawn and jumble my eyes. I lean in close and our noses touch. She tries to shake her head but it has nowhere to move in the vice of iron. Her ski jump tickles me. She leans back, gripping the bars. I've had a few. I want very badly to press into these bars, those hands.

She says, Don't you ever work? I don't know about you.

I say, I take my work with me. Tapping the side of my head. Come on.

She says, Couldn't possibly. As a matter of fact your wife is expecting me. Plus I'm late. Handclaps and soaring, atmospheric guitars blare down on the other patio.

Yeah, I say. Hey, don't tell her you saw me, okay? Our secret, I say, winking, though I guess I'm telling you now.

She says, Well I can't be confidante to both of you, can I? Now she winks back, with feigned effort, scrunching up the side of her face. She lets go of the fence, waves, and starts walking. Fine. She yells something to someone on the inside of the Fiddle and keeps going, to meet you. I squeeze the bars, give them a shake.

Greg says, Wow, I haven't seen that Silvy in ages.

The waiter is dropping off new pints. It's hot, I'm fumbling. I say, Well, it's very possible that she wants me. The waiter is hovering close now with the empty tray, perfect posture, chest puffed out like a rooster, watching me beneath hooded eyelids with barely-concealed hatred, then glaring at Greg and Adam. He is like a forty-year-old child. He wants to settle the bill.

Adam says, Jesus, Mark, this is what I'm talking about: you're too distracted to see a bigger picture.

Greg says, I can picture what Mark is getting at.

Very possible, I say, laughing. I hand the waiter enough money for everyone because I know my turn is long overdue. He rolls his eyes as I begin to tell him to keep the change; he pivots on one foot and struts through the door into the diner.

Adam starts up again. Suddenly I don't know why I'm sitting here, nursing another beer in the blinding sunshine while Silvia walks swiftly down a shaded boulevard, further from me and closer to you.

My pregnancy canvases are several years old now. Life-size nudes in profile—or three-quarter profile, never straight on—and each one eight months pregnant. Leaning against the wall of the attic studio with all the others. Right now I'm up here drinking, reexamining. Every canvas: hand on stomach and hand below, face turned and looking straight out. There is nothing original about them, all done from the same model, except the one where I worked from an old picture of you when you were carrying Robin. Though she wasn't Robin then. We didn't know the sex, didn't know she'd be born nine pounds, with flapped out ears, the same ones you had until you were about the age she is now. You pleaded with your father the better part of two years, you said, to have yours surgically pinned back.

In the photo you are about to roll your eyes—the picture was my idea. The look says, *You can't be serious.* In the portrait it becomes a more tired expression, an embodiment of one of your favourite taglines, *Can't you ever be serious?* Battle-weary eyes, lips pursed defiantly. *I'm having this child, our child, right now, and still you don't listen.* I was finishing this two years ago in the middle of the night when a moth flew in through the attic window. It ignored the light, though, opting for the canvas instead, landing on your shoulder. I swung a broad stroke over its pulsing body, trapping it. And it remains on this shoulder, waiting to collapse into dust, but the paint holds it there. Is an exoskeleton considered bone? A mottling of skin, a

strange welt on your pregnant body, a tarnish on your altered anatomy with its perfect sphere still clinging to your slender frame. You didn't keep any of the weight on. You didn't breastfeed. You scoffed at the notion of postpartum depression. You got right back to work. Articles, reviews, your first story collection—tales of refugees and counselors, great lovers and Bovar-esque women, secretaries and closed-caption writers. Each of them thrown into a kind of chaos and then clawing their way out, forcing an outcome for better or worse. Sometimes you wish I was one of your characters, pushing through things, matting or sealing dried canvases as quickly as you publish your carefully wrought words.

I'm sitting at the desk beneath the attic window, scotch in my tumbler, insect chirp of the laptop on standby. I'm supposed to be digitally archiving my work, trying to get organized. But I can't stop spinning the computer chair to face your likeness, staring me down from the easel across the room. I want to be tarnished but the scotch isn't working. I am unquestionably alert. I get up and remove the canvas, replace it with one of my prototypes, one of the uninspired pregna-bots. More scotch and I am mixing the oils. More scotch until I come up with that same old tone, pouring a drop of it into the mix. I wash out the features, obliterating the face of *Final Trimester #7* with a flurry of strokes. Finished years ago, a thing decidedly complete is erased in moments.

I am tiptoeing circles around the easel. I am dancing with possibilities in front of a pregnant mannequin. I am drinking more scotch and you are unconscious downstairs, asleep for hours now. The creaking floorboards scoring your dreams. I jump in and dash off a line here and fill in a shadow there. I am fencing with the

canvas. This has never been so easy. This thing is painting itself. The features are falling into place, and it's her. Silvia Bearing, bearing child.

I am knocked on my ass, staring up at it, hands planted behind me, first suggestion of light at the window. So maybe I wanted it to be her all along. So what? It's all spinning now, at any rate, cold attic at dawn. And sitting in the shadow of her likeness is what finally sends me toward a sleep I can't fight off. I hear your voice, distant and muzzled, as if I'm underwater. *Of course*, you say. Of course.

We are tented under the blue of the bedsheet. A bunker on an ocean floor, surface light unfathomable, miles above. Eyes still adjusting. On the other side it is morning, but here there is no day to be met. Song lyrics swim by in the abyss.

I say, There's that one you like about the smallest bones, the feet and the inner ear.

You say, But which are the very smallest? Your breath hot.

I say, The feet! Unless, the ear's. Unless, it's tough. To say. I'm uncertain.

You say, I will leave you. I will walk away on these tiniest bones.

This is a mild case of Momentary Lapse Syndrome. This, I say, will pass.

You say, They will carry me, far from you.

You raise a heel to my knee. The pads of your toes feverish. You have been storing heat, preparing.

I say, Is this about last week?

About getting home a little tipsy, and declaring how attracted I was to someone else, that someone being your best friend, being Silvia. I don't tell you about

the painting now, I don't dare, but last week was different. When I feel near complete, in the wake of a drunken moment that pulls me into my most perfect self, I begin to overflow. Spill. No secret is safe, no private reflection shuttered, but even the embryos and shells of things—urges, time-drowned memories, projections, lazy wishing—all pronounced as God's unwavering truth. Silvia Bearing tumbled out of my mouth. Definitively. You grip the sheet with both hands, as if clinging to the railing of a ship, then peel it back to let the light in.

You say, No. Mark, I realize now that, well, I think I've wanted to go, off and on, for years. I don't think I'm the same woman I was.

You gulp at the air, fishlike. Other varied blues. The wall, its reflection in the gilded mirror. Vertical smear of sky between the curtains. Blue. The bookshelf and on top. A box of cotton swabs and a half-empty bottle of Bombay gin. Some oil canvases of mine from three years ago that refused to sell. A dry-mounted Picasso print, The Old Guitarist, leaning against the wall. Robin in the doorway, navy school uniform and ten years old. Robin blushing, as if she's well beyond her years. As if she has caught us saying forbidden words. Her face reddens in a wave that reaches her protruding ears.

She says, I'll be as late as a nun is tight.

I force a laugh but you don't. You're submerged again, groaning underneath like the hull of that ship splitting in two, leaving me on the surface. Robin and I look at each other. I say, Let's take the momma's car. It's strange to me now that you bought the Volvo wagon before we were together, that it was yours alone, back before its blue sprouted rusting patches of red and brown.

The field behind Scona High, just before dusk, your hand in mine. Robin a few yards ahead. In the last moments of sunlight we are pacing the perimeter of the empty soccer field. Robin stops at the corner, turning on a toe to face us.

I said *outside* the line, Dad. You'll jinx it.

I step out of bounds, to your side of the line. The final tryout for Rep team is tomorrow and she's nervous, wanted us to come here and check things out, make sure the field is okay. She's wearing an old green jersey, striped socks over shin pads, cleats. You said you could use the air and so why not humour her. And here we are. The sky, pink cotton candy on fire. Robin breaks into a backwards trot, spins and sprints further ahead as we round the corner.

I say, Are you sure we should be encouraging this?

You say, She's just working through things.

Remember those other days? The pre-Robins.

Mm, you say.

The endless time. Daydreaming. But getting stuff done. I sound like a car commercial.

You say, I have a new book in the fall. You shrug. Besides, Mark, if anyone was gung-ho about parenting… You lean your head on my shoulder, almost whispering, You trapped me with her, didn't you. You chuckle hollowly, staring intently at the grass, like you might throw yourself down on it any moment and refuse to continue.

I say, Absølutely, I've wanted to paralyze you since day one, cordon off your existence, lull you into a zombie-like state of dependence. Yet lately it's when I'm near Silvia Bearing that I, myself, feel an irrepressible unconsciousness is looming.

You bite my earlobe. You say, Besides, you're the one not producing.

I say, I have things on the go.

A quivering mound of a creature, a rabbit, darts onto the other side of the field. Then another in pursuit, closing the gap. Near the centre line the second one leaps and lands on the other. A terrible sound, like a muffled goat bleating, then a dozen lightning thrusts and it dismounts. The first takes off and the second tears after it again. The city is slowly being overrun by them. Robin is yelling, Do something. Why is it hurting it? Do something. The male catches up again, at the goalposts, this time biting the female on the side of the face. She gets away again. Tufts of fur are drifting in the air at various points above the field. Robin runs toward us, crying. You squeeze my hand, bring it up to your mouth, and look me in the eyes. You let go and bend down to let Robin walk into your arms. The animals continue their feral race, up and down the field, oblivious to us. The sky lost its colour quickly.

I run a few meters out. I holler, Hey, you rabbits. There's a big tryout on this grass tomorrow, so take your antics elsewhere, we'd be greatly indebted.

Why'd he say that, she asks you.

You rabbits are ancient history, I yell as we walk to the parking lot.

They're just pretending, anyway, she says confidentially to you, all bravery now, as if I've taken matters too far. I think they were lucky after all, she says. Good luck for the game.

I can see smears of grey and brown, just slower than pinballs, bouncing around the field, ears bent back, as we pull away.

A freak storm, middle of May. The snow has been coming down for hours, since early morning, reversing a spring that already felt like summer. Undoing the advances of colour, paralyzing the streets. The sky hesitates between brackishness and a twilight green hue that suspends the afternoon in an eerie timelessness. People are acting like it's California, like we need to call in the army, as if we don't already know this entire routine, intimately, for half of the year. The old guy across the street stood in his undershirt beneath the whiteout for an hour, just stood there looking up, rubbing his hands on his sides and pacing his yard before pausing again, divining some sort of sign.

I'm downtown, circling the law courts in vain, looking for free parking. I stop out front, at the bottom of the steps—parked illegally but I'll be fast. I need to go home and get back to work. Inside, the lineup. I was caught speeding a couple weeks ago, going fifty-five in a school zone. A woman three up from me yawns and then I yawn. My ears pop. Yellowing walls. The interior of the courthouse seems enough to make you admit to anything, just to get out. There's a kid behind me with headphones thumping out dance music. The air conditioner is blasting, set for summer already. Everybody in jackets, shuffling to stay warm in the muddy puddles at our feet. I'm thinking about money, balance, the fact that it's mostly your money paying the ticket.

After almost an hour the clerk orders, Next, and I step out from the cordoned-off line.

I say, I'm here to pay this.

She says, Payments are over there. On the other side. You can't pay that here.

I say, So I have to line up all over.

She points to the sign above her window. This is to get in to see His Honourable Justice. This is Appeals.

I say, I don't have an appeal. I thought it was all one line.

She says, Ignorant *and* stubborn. She laughs, whitest teeth. Hey, listen, you've waited this long. Just say yes and he'll see you in a few moments, right through that door.

I look at her. She raises her delicate eyebrows. I say, I'm here to appeal. Yes.

Inside there is a secretary behind a big desk. I sink into a deep leather chair. She says, Don't get comfortable, His Honourable Justice will see you immediately. I go through a heavy oak door and he waves me to sit down opposite him. He pulls a banana out of a brown lunch bag and peels it. It only takes a second for banana to fill the room.

He says, Let's see that. I pass him the ticket. Says here you were going twenty-five over. What's your beef?

I say, I don't have a particular beef. I actually misunderstood the lineup scheme. He has stuffed the entire banana in his mouth. He is deep in thought, ruminating.

He says, mouth full, The lineup scheme. Yes, there's always one of those, isn't there. He is studying me, still chewing. I shrug as his throat expands with the lump of banana, like a snake coaxing a rodent down its body. Tell you what. You're

in luck. We'll adjust this. I think you only went fifteen over, and that halves the penalty. He scribbles on a form and staples the ticket on top. He stands up and passes it to me, and I notice a string of banana flesh tethered to the bottom of his tie.

I say, Thanks a lot. Some day out there, huh.

He looks irritated, gestures at the door. He says, I have to see other people too, you know.

There is no parking ticket, but the car refuses to start, the whirring of ignition getting slower and deeper. The absolute silence of sitting in a vehicle after it won't turn over, snow blotting out the windshield. In the middle of May. A tow truck hitches the Volvo and waits to pull it away. I am calling you from this payphone. Cold plastic, rattling earpiece.

I say, The Volvo's kaput.

You say, We need to talk. You sound like you've been crying. Maybe you're not going anywhere. Maybe you're as lost in this as I am.

Okay, but wait a sec. I need to tell the guy—can we afford to fix it?

Are you listening, Mark? Don't you ever hear me? I mean, really. Hear me… The line is breaking up. Of course the line is breaking up.

I can't, actually. I'll just get a quote from the garage tomorrow.

I was up in the attic today and I think we should talk. Can you get home?

The bus considers each stop meticulously. The blizzard continues, people moving in slow motion. Thinking about you leaving me, the possibility, untying every little thing. Does *We're History* really sound like something you'd say? It's getting darker.

The bus passes United Cycle, and inside, two rows of bike machines bracketing the aisle. Cyclists in full stretchy spandex gear, sunglasses and helmets, facing each other, taking shelter from the elements. Out of the darkness the storefront is blue neon. A fish tank with cyclists underwater, going nowhere. Their heads bobbing side to side, all the legs pumping, synchronized.

You are waiting for me in the living room with two wine bottles, one empty. You say, It's brilliant, honey. And I see the new canvas, above the old piano, hung almost to the ceiling. The pregnant Silvia Bearing, front and centre. I stand perfectly still. You say, I'm sorry, I know, I know. Maybe you weren't through with it yet, but we couldn't resist. Silvia thinks you should do a whole series with her.

Your sarcasm thickens with every word, and becomes almost grotesque. I say, Look, you're obviously upset. I need to sit down.

You say, Upset? Why, Mark, it's the best thing you've done in ages. The glug of wine into your glass. You say, Oh, you mean about this obsession for her, this little crush, and you, creeping around? You say, Hmm, a toast, you goddamn pathetic bitch. Do you know what the last few hours have been like for me?

Your glass catches the light and the room is stretched miniature across the dark red inside. I say, Silvia saw this too?

She helped me put it up. Afterwards, I told her not to come around for a little while. That you need a little time.

I am having trouble unclenching my jaw. The phone is ringing, somewhere, but neither of us is moving in the slightest. I mumble, So you're leaving. Right?

You say, It wouldn't be the end of the world if I did—obviously. You look up at the portrait and close your eyes as the answering machine and then the sound of your recorded voice, cheerful and assured, kicks in. Now Greg is leaving a message about racquetball and drinks, and it sounds alien in our silence, like he's calling from some long forgotten moment in history.

I walk over to the piano. I say, But what about right now? I step up onto the bench and make to grab the canvas.

You say, Right now I'm here, unless you take that down. That has to stay, or else I walk. I want you to leave that there for as long as it takes you to figure out what you want. When you do, maybe I'll still be here, maybe I won't.

I can't imagine you wanting the picture up here, but I know this is serious. I say, I'm listening.

Robin appears in the room. She says, There you are Dad—what are you doing with the Silvia picture? I look at our daughter and I am starting to lose my balance on the creaky old piano bench. My left foot springs up, for leverage, against the lowest octave of keys, making the deep splatter of notes groan. I feel like I should step up with my other foot, then continue to climb, on top of the piano, through the ceiling, onto the bed upstairs, through that ceiling too, and then I'd at last be back, safe in my studio in the attic, where I could really think about all of this.

Robin is sleeping at your mother's. It's two a.m. and we all drove through the woods and snuck into Queen Elizabeth Outdoor Pool on this, one of the warmest nights I can remember. Silvia Bearing's book launch was tonight and everybody wanted to keep

going after the reception, and then again after the bar closed. Silvia and the others are still in the water. Sometimes, now, there will be a streak of several days when I don't think about her much. She's moving to Toronto at the end of the summer. A naked man dives off the board with a fat bottle of cheap champagne, eliciting cheers from the small gathering of drunken swimmers. A police copter whirling hundreds of feet above the ravine, shining its beam back and forth, having trouble finding any trespassers in its swath.

On the other side of the fence, in the back of the Volvo, we are soaked to the bone, your black skirt and my grey blazer hanging off the front seats, dripping twin curtains of water, a beaded, soothing sound. We are loaded and I have no idea how we'll get home, nor do I care. You place your hands on my shoulders and push me down your body, your palms slippery, so that I draw my knees up beneath me and my feet are jammed against the door. We both want the same thing, at least tonight, maybe tomorrow, and I know this is some kind of luck. I am here, head in your lap, right now, staunching this moment with my tongue, containing it. You say, sighing, I want you to paint me when we get back. There is a laboured silence.

I mumble, Nothing would give me greater pleasure. But I have a feeling that once we are home we will each fall headlong into our own deep, private slumbers. At the height of coming your legs close together, prayerfully, sealing me from the sound of your gasp. Your thighs push against my ears, and it's like being caught in a seashell, all I can hear is the ocean.

Diplomat Sander

Almost a month before feeling the button of a landmine depressing into its plastic disc beneath his boot near a river in Croatia, Sander was in Munich waiting for the connecting flight that would take him to the last diplomatic assignment of his career. Back in Canada, he was retiring far before his colleagues, comfortably they would say, due in part to a large life insurance payment from his wife's death two years prior. He looked life in the eye and it blinked, and he realized he had no idea where it had taken him.

Sander was at the airport in Munich, trying to undermine the four-hour wait between flights. He ate a giant pretzel as slowly as he could. He bought his son a soccer jersey from a boutique store, unable to remember if the boy still cared for the sport. After washing his face and brushing his teeth for the second time, he went outside with his black duffel bag to the plaza between terminals, where dance music and an excited announcer drowned out the back and forth movement of travelers with luggage in tow. Next to the beer gardens a beach volleyball court sat as if it had risen spontaneously through the concrete, its players muscled and nearly naked, punching and slapping the ball in the fifteen degree weather. He watched them and imagined goose bumps like pox covering their bodies. A giant screen above showed player pictures and vital statistics as the announcer seemed to enthuse—from what Sander understood with a limited sense of German—about the greatness of everything. At that moment his phone buzzed and it showed a message from his son, David: WHERE

ON EARTH IS MY FATHER? ☺. A running joke between them. Despite his boredom, or because of it, Sander couldn't rouse himself into replying.

The announcement of his retirement was received with business-like approval from the Ministry. He was a minor diplomat, but lately managed to say the wrong thing at the wrong time, embarrassing the Ministry, government, and nation in only a sentence or two at any given luncheon or gala. There was an interview in Moscow that made small headlines, one where he went on about what he called the 'death of diplomacy,' ridiculing his government's efforts as 'teeth-first' and 'at times duplicitous' when dealing with nations in conflict. He would have been severely reassigned had he not stepped aside himself. It was made clear to him that this last job, Sarajevo, ought to be a trip without incident, simply exchange debriefings on positions with the opposing functionary, work the conferences, and bring back the new portfolio. Opportunities for Canadian-Bosnian Economic Partnership was the study, as remote from his mind as anything could be.

It was anyone's guess what there was to do once a career was over. There was maintaining David, but—perhaps when it mattered most now that the boy's mother was gone—Sander had lost the desire to tend to that particular connection between father and son. When David didn't come home for two days in July, Sander enjoyed the solace without too much worry, felt only stood up, as if by a friend. He didn't take note of the fact that already David had been disappearing with regularity. His thoughts were indistinguishable planets orbiting around a hazy cluster of space dust instead of a sun. Sander felt a chill and turned his jacket collar up, watching the airport volleyball with detachment, as if it was part of an unsettling dream. It was

like they had been playing since the beginning of time, and would go on springing, lunging, and yelling forever.

In Eastern Croatia, the day Dragica saw a ghost, she had stopped at her husband's instead of going directly home. She was thinking of physical things: the sight of her students joyously pushing out of her classroom at the sound of the Gymnasium's last bell. The chalkdust opening into the air like pollen of spent flowers as she cleaned the blackboard brushes. Her satchel, heavy with assignments, digging into her shoulder as she pedaled her bicycle toward her estranged husband's flat—formerly their marriage apartment. The muscle burn in the back of her calves as she toiled up the flat city's one slanted street to get there.

Lately she had been dividing things into categories of physical and spiritual, superstitiously, without knowing why, and this troubled her. Compulsively, she would place things on one side or the other. The odd trip to mass was physical, the water, the wafer, crossing herself and occasionally beating her chest. Writing in her notebook at night was physical, the smell of the pages, the type of pen and pace of cursive and irrevocability of ink on paper. Coaxing her houseplants to grow, however, was spiritual, as was imagining a baby. She was jumpy and irritated with herself for days when she arrived at Krešo's door.

Dragica dropped in at her husband's place every week or so, though they had been separated since the war, when Dragica returned to her mother. When Krešo came home injured and burnt just before the fall of Vukovar, Dragica was already at a place for refugees near Zagreb with her mother. Krešo then left immediately to wait

out the war with some relatives in Hungary, telling Dragica by letter that he was through with her. His wedding band had been blown off with part of his hand so he wouldn't be sending that back either. They had been married for just over a year. Dragica left her devastation alone during those months away, and when she returned to her town she acted the only way she saw fit. By then others from the 109th battalion had come back for good, others who would know better. But that didn't stop Dragica from telling her mother, stumbling into her room drunk and delirious late one night—and by way of her mother the neighbourhood—that Krešo was missing and had probably been killed in battle.

When Krešo reappeared living and breathing six months later, to stay, Dragica was ashamed, felt that she had tempted fate by lying about death when there were so many dead, her own father among them.

Sander woke up late in the new city and looked out the hotel window at the cloudy morning and street below. The day before, his assignment complete, he had boarded the return flight from Sarajevo, but at the stopover in Zagreb he didn't get back on the plane. It was early evening when he arrived in the small Slavonian city from Zagreb by train. He secured a hotel, found the woman's number in the book, and went to a café where he drank two beers and, with only minor confusion, understood that the waiter had never heard of the woman. Before sleeping he'd been satisfied with the progress made—her name in the directory was a promise that she still lived there after all—but standing at the dreary hotel window that morning, bewilderment flooded in and it staggered him. He tried to focus. It had been two weeks since he

left Canada. He picked up the phone from the nightstand and called to update his son on his whereabouts. There was a long pause, familiar to both men. "You're supposed to be in Toronto. Today," David warned, sounding more than eighteen, more parent than child, more like his mother.

"You're right," Sander spoke softly. "But I need to, well, take care of some stuff."

"Stuff? Yeah, well, the house is burning down, all around me as we speak, but at least it's warm. Plus I quit university and bought a motorbike for stunting. How long, Dad?"

"You can call me Sander if you want, like when you were younger. Angrier."

"You never used to pull this nonsense." There was a clicking sound made by his son, or it could have been the connection. The sound of a son whose mother has been dead for two years. It was true that the only reason Sander could put foot in front of foot in this other country was because of his wife's absolute and total absence. He was too aware of that strange equation, but it had been bothering him less and less. Soon, he thought, it would vanish completely. Back in Sarajevo it had struck him that his late wife was in his mind hardly ever, and there was no grief at the reality of her absence. In fact, he had lost track of when he had stopped grieving. He took a long breath, irritated, wondering why a child thinks a parent could be so incapable of change.

"Don't worry. Don't keep tabs on me, David. Just keep an eye on things there."

Air was audibly forced out of his son's nostrils in a long stream of disapproval. Or disappointment. "The phone's been ringing a lot. Your office keeps leaving messages."

Sander was waiting, while flipping channels on the hotel room television, for him to say something else. He came across an ad for a new hotel at a beach on the Adriatic. "If you need me back tomorrow," said Sander, distractedly.

"What a colossal joke this is," David said, warmly enough that Sander knew he was off the hook, that he could let the conversation drift into some dark corner in the back of his mind and not trouble it.

Sander got dressed and set out to walking, inquiring at various shops and kiosks on the surrounding streets. An hour later he stumbled onto a piece of luck. "I know a Dragica Petrić," the woman behind the counter at a bakery said in English. "She is a teacher at the gymnasium where my daughter goes." He got directions and bought pastry filled with a soft, mild cheese which he ate on a bench in the town square. Sitting beneath the marble war memorial, he sounded out the columns of names in his head, noticing that one shared the girl's—the woman's—last name. It started to rain, lightly. In his personal and professional life he'd grown sick of all words, and the slick meaninglessness of words, but a list of people who died on a monument held, at least, some sort of accuracy. There was nothing diplomatic about death. Sander looked around the square. He once imagined the girl's home town to be a dusty, backward place, but only the prevalence of red-tiled roofs supported his clichéd guesswork. The facades of stores, café bars, and tenements could have been

in any European destination, and there seemed to be only a few condemned, half-skeletal buildings or empty lots of rubble leftover from the previous decade.

"Hey, love, you made it." Krešo smiled with his eyebrows raised as Dragica walked past him into the living room. He followed and lightly pinched her side. "You're getting solid—have you gained a few?" He grinned at her with his head tilted, clearly feeling himself to be bursting with boyishness and mischief.

"Take off your shirt, won't you? I don't have much time," she said, producing a tin of ointment from her bag. He pulled his collar over his head and slid off the shirt before lying on his stomach on the sofa-bed. There was a half-finished puzzle of a spaceship launch on the coffee table, unfitted pieces of blue sky and cirrus clouds scattered to the edges and onto the floor. She straddled his waist and massaged the pungent jelly into the scar tissue on his broad back. She loved the strange, almost green light of the room, the remaining brightness of late afternoon filtering through the canopy lowered over the window. Being in that familiar shade with a man she once fiercely loved was a respite from real existence.

Krešo grimaced as she prodded him. "They're reconstructing that shelled-out office building, to think, after letting it be for so long." His tone stopped mocking incredulity, softening. "Looks like work for me."

Dragica knew this to be a lie. He probably did too. Krešo hadn't worked regularly in nearly fifteen years. There just wasn't any work to be had. "Krešo, you haven't a clue about building things, nor any labour for that matter." Dragica

laughed, picturing him on a jobsite reading a blueprint upside down and scratching his head.

"Eh, fuck, this town's as exciting as lumpy yoghurt." Krešo was putting his shirt back on as she took her earrings off in front of the mirror, thinking that he wouldn't change because she had to first, she would get away from this city once and for all. They both talked often of moving somewhere else. She was forty-two but could have passed for ten years younger. And who would truly miss her if she left? Of course she would never leave. How stupid life was! Everything that seemed urgent one day would be forgotten the next, as if evaporated overnight. Krešo lifted her long black hair and kissed the back of her neck. Pigeons were nattering outside on the balcony. "By the way, I decided to humbly donate my talents to your cause, if you wish," he said, referring to one of many ongoing discussions. Last week she told him she wanted to risk it and attempt to become pregnant—she was already getting well old for that, but the desire to conceive was stronger than ever. A life without a child suddenly seemed terrible, and boring. She didn't tell him that a father hanging around wasn't in the picture she held in her mind. But this day she didn't want a baby either, just a quick lay. "Forget that," she said flatly. "When you capitulate so easily I don't trust you."

They went back to the sofa bed and exercised their marriage rights in that dreamlike light, as if they were a normal couple. To Dragica this exercising was peppered a bit with nostalgia, and a little with grief for an imagined existence they once almost had, which kept her interested just enough. When they finished, Krešo passed her a Kleenex from the coffee table and she wiped him from her stomach. He

quickly resumed work on the spaceship puzzle, singing a folk tune in loud falsetto, keeping time by slapping his knee with his three-fingered hand: "A-mer-ika, A-mer-ika, don't go there unless you have to!"

At the bottom of the apartment stairs Dragica opened the door and then paused, realizing her long hair to be sweaty and matted. She rifled her hands through it, taking her time to put it up. A man carrying a black duffel bag walked by on the road, only ten metres away, not making a sound, not even his feet on the gravel. Dragica froze with her hands on her head and hairpin between her lips. Something was familiar about the man. Only minutes later did she realize it was a vision from her youth, from 1985. A Canadian boy she had been with for a few days back then, though she hadn't travelled to him in her mind for many years. But she must have been seeing things, for those years had barely touched him, this man looked no different from the young man she vaguely remembered.

In the moment, the spectre had not looked her way, nor made a sound, like celluloid film projected onto the street, a cutout from another decade. A delivery truck pulled up and parked in front of the building, obscuring her view. After a few moments, she shook herself into motion and walked out onto the street. The spirit disappeared, like it was never there; it must have been one, after all, for a man could not have vanished so quickly. She looked back to the direction it had come from. The train station stood silent at the head of the intersection down the way. Do ghosts travel by rail? She unlocked her bicycle from the lamp post and began to walk it home.

*

It was mid-afternoon. Sander waited by the fence at the edge of the field in front of the gymnasium, hoping she would leave through the front doors. He felt a little foolish but didn't know how else to get to her. He'd attempted both Petrić numbers from the book without making himself understood in his prepared, broken attempts at Croatian which he thought could be arrived at by using the more pan-slavic basics of Russian. Both tries yielded quiet old women who asked what or said sorry to his repeated forays of garbled phrases and questions. The second one hung up.

The clouds had pushed aside and the sun blanketed the field with the intensity of mid-summer, though September was nearly over. He thought of the last summer he was abroad as an unmarried man, though he was already engaged to marry, nearly twenty years earlier. He was preparing for a career and polishing his Russian in St.Petersburg, and then traveled southern Europe for a month. There was a woman he spent the night with in Italy, another in Ljubljana he fooled around with, and there was another still, Dragica, with whom he became entangled for ten days on the Adriatic coast.

Back in Sarajevo, he had begun imagining that summer, through flashes of his mind's grainy documentary lens. He had remembered being in the sea, their heads above water, and their bodies wrapped around each other below. The way the girl's expression, close up in the water, seemed for a moment so open and honest, excitable, before returning to a perfected coy look that made him wonder if the alteration had occurred at all. Had that really happened? Kissing her huge eyes. Feverishly fucking one afternoon in a dark room, perhaps the curtains were drawn, then probably every night until he left. The situation was vague to him now: she had been visiting

the coast with friends and he was alone. They would walk around talking half of the day and at night she would reappear at the café bars with her friends. There was dancing. He might have told the girl something about returning the next summer. "You have been so great," she had said when he had to leave for Canada.

Now, watching the gymnasium doors, thinking about those last moments of her, and how he'd been, he saw that there were two of him after all. One stayed there, on the brink, and saw the generosity of what was possible. The other returned home and didn't alter once throughout the years as husband, as father. After those ten days there were two postcards sent each way over the Atlantic during the next year—one he disposed of before his new bride might see—and then nothing. Before long it was the nineties and the girl's country declared itself and then war broke out.

Students began to emerge from the school, first a trickle, then a crowd of dozens. None seemed to register his presence as they made their ways to the street. Then for two minutes nobody came through the doors. He was approaching the school when three young women came out, but the one on the left had Dragica's dark eyes, spaced wide apart—he wondered if she could have remained so youthful. He realized the impossibility of this as he stopped in front of them, looking at the girl. The other girls were talking on cell phones; none of them took note of him. He asked the unoccupied one in her language, causing her head to turn: "Does it have in there, the teacher, Dragica Petrić?"

"Where are you from?" the girl answered in English, her eyes holding him. When he replied she said the teacher probably had left already. "I have to go," she

said, looking anxiously at her friends who had begun walking ahead and were joking about the foreigner into their phones.

"But, the teacher, Miss Petrić," he said. "Do you know where I can find her?" She stopped, looking annoyed at his intrusion. But after a moment she sighed and produced a cell phone from her purse and called the operator, getting an address. He tried to appear good-natured, shrugging a bit with his hands in pockets. She stared at him then, looking in that way that professes or pretends to know what was at the heart of the other. She yelled at the other two to go on without her.

"I know where it is, it's not far from my house."

"You're sure she isn't at the school?" he tried again. She shook her head.

"You can follow if you want, I guess." Sander introduced himself and held out his hand, and she hesitated, then shook it. "Vesna."

They walked down the street in the opposite direction from which he'd come, away from the city centre, past tenements in various states of disrepair and tiny old houses. She asked how long he was staying in the city and he said he didn't know. She looked up at him and politely smiled but didn't say anything else. "Is she your teacher?" he tried.

"She was, once. She is a good woman. All the students like her." Vesna was blushing and seemed self-conscious now that they were walking together, alone. They went on in silence for some time and then stopped at an old apartment building. The girl waited while he pressed the buzzer beside the teacher's name many times with no reply coming from the little speaker. "Nothing," she said. "What can you do." Sander pulled out his cell phone and tried calling, looking up at the balconies of

the top floor. Vesna was looking at his feet, slightly scuffed black boots. She was beginning to feel sorry for the foreigner. "Well, I live just further, on the edge of town," she said to him when he shook his head and put the phone back in his pocket. "Come have coffee with me and my father if you like, only a little while, and then you can come back and she'll be here." They started off again and quickly reached the end of a street where there were no more houses beyond and the road became gravel. Soon they were walking beside fallow fields. He briefly considered that she could actually be Dragica's daughter—it was unlikely but perhaps they merely didn't live together—her eyes were so distinct and similar to the ones he remembered from the past.

"Do you like it here?" he asked as they approached a house on a large, fenced-in plot of land populated with plum trees.

"It's okay," she said. "Eventually I'll be in Zagreb but for now this is fine."

The thought recklessly flickered in his mind that if she did in fact belong to Dragica and she was just the right age, well, she could be his too. "How old are you?"

"I'm nearly nineteen," she said as if it was a burden. "Older than my friends. My father didn't have me in school until after the war and I was eight. Before long I'll be finished at the gymnasium. I'm thinking about being a lawyer after."

He listened to their feet on the small stones beneath. "And your mother? This sounds stupid, but I thought maybe the teacher was your mother and you were taking me home to her."

"I have no mother," she said matter-of-factly.

The house was very old but well-kept. Vesna directed Sander to sit down on a couch in the front room and then went into the kitchen. She returned with a sixtyish man, conversing rapidly with him, and Sander began to feel foolish for accepting her offer. He couldn't understand them but heard the man mention Dragica Petrić twice and nod his head. Vesna sat down beside Sander. "This is my father," she said. The man shook Sander's hand and greeted him, smiling pleasantly. He went into the kitchen and reappeared with a plate of cookies and a tumbler of strong alcohol. From the bookshelf he retrieved a roughly sketched diagram on draft paper. It had lines and numbers on it, a misshapen house in the middle and a river at the bottom. He placed this on the coffee table directly in front of Sander. Vesna rolled her eyes and spoke harsh words at the man. "Don't pay him any attention," she said. "He's always trying to make some deal." He held up the piece of paper.

Sander's face was burning from plum brandy and a tint of anger when he left, the piece of paper folded into his back pocket. Taking him for an enterprising foreigner, the man had wanted to sell him the property directly next to them and the house on it for a total of twenty thousand euros. From what he understood, a Serbian family had rented there before the war and didn't return after. And the price was cheap, but the land hadn't been officially cleared of mines yet. He thought it a possibility that the girl had taken him all that way to make a sales pitch—he inferred that it was possible, even likely that they needed some money as of late. Others had gone over the land and found nothing in the way of anti-personnel explosives, the man had said, forcing Vesna to translate. Eventually, Sander began to suspect, or imagine, that the father was meaning to say Vesna would be more helpful with

Dragica if he helped them with their money problems. Being a diplomat, the idea of blackmail normally put a wry grin on his face, but just then he felt foolish to be there. All that land would be his, the father had been saying in broken English. "Leave him alone," Vesna yelled at her father. Passing the time, she asked Sander many questions about Canada. When he felt it was time to go, Sander thanked them for the hospitality and accepted the diagram, to pacify the man. Wishing him good luck, Vesna had put her hand on his shoulder just before he rose off the couch, and her eyes, and the idea of Dragica, held him again for a moment before he stepped aside and walked out. Now, as he walked off of their property, another phone call to Dragica produced nothing. It was dark and he was getting nowhere. He kicked at the gravel as he turned onto the road.

The morning was almost like any other. The kitchen unmarred by dust, dirt, or remnants of food. Clutter was forbidden. Dragica's mother kept the room, like the rest of the apartment, as orderly as a church, waiting for relatives and friends to drop in and confess to anything and everything they had seen or done in the town that week, which was usually nothing. It was Saturday, the last day of the fall festival. Dragica stood humming at the stove, warming milk in one pot and tempting coffee to boil in the other. She had dreamt of ghosts for the second night, pleasurable dreams, and woken mildly intrigued. One ghost, that young man, doing card tricks on the beach in another life, in 1985. The determination in his brow when he taught her one, holding her wrists to show her hands what to do. Another spirit, her father, spooning heapfuls of sugar into her cupped hands, which were too tiny and let most of it

overflow to the ground as they laughed. She brought burek, cheese, pate, buns, and yoghurt to the table. Her mother walked into the kitchen and sat down, saying, "The phone was for you yesterday."

"Yeah?" Dragica said, handing her a cup.

Her mother sipped the coffee and cleared her throat. "It was a foreigner," she said. "A man. His language was bad. Something about eggs, or trains, and Zagreb—maybe wanted to buy something."

Dragica looked at her mother staring blankly into the open air, as if she was incoherent. "He must have said his name." She thought of the few foreign men she'd known over the years. Most likely it was nothing, she told herself. These things never amounted to anything. These near-diversions from life.

"No, he said yours. It might have been China calling, from what I know."

"Well," Dragica said, allowing particles of curiosity to land where they might on her. She sat down and pushed the plates toward her mother, trying to make her eat. The older woman deflected, keeping a square space open in front of her with only her coffee at its border. She moved her envelope with its ordered papers from the side table and then reached for the old calculator with the big grey numbers. She began tapping figures into it. Dragica's mother liked to remind herself about money: how much pension would arrive in one year with the rates changing, how much in five; how many euros would eight thousand kunas buy; the amount of income her husband might have saved were he alive. Dragica knew the figures intimately, for her mother never seemed to tire of repeating them. But that morning she didn't mind hearing them called out, rather it seemed endearing.

Then her mother looked down into her cup and muttered one of her daily mantras into it. "A perfectly good husband so close by and you don't think to feed him."

Dragica stared hard at her mother. The dust from her dreams was settling and defensiveness was creeping in through the suddenly open air. Endearment was gone like it hadn't existed a moment earlier. There were family functions to attend before the festival. Dragica thought of how the day would probably go, and despaired.

"We might all go to the square together," her mother said, meaning with Krešo.

Dragica got up and walked to the stove, noticing the skin formed on the leftover milk in the pot. It looked horrible. "We'll see." She tried sounding light as she left the kitchen into the dimness of the hallway. She felt like she was on the threshold of a closing window that she just might prop open a little longer.

Sander sat at the Gradska Kavana café on the edge of town square. It was past midnight and the waiters had taken most of the outdoor tables away to make room for the crowds that had already filled the square for the finale concert. He had picked up a pack of Ronhills and sat waiting, chain smoking with his back to the wall. A more traditional band with mandolins shared the stage with a rock band. There were ballads and there were raucous songs the people danced to. The girl, Vesna, had found him in the square and apologized if he was offended the night before. She told him to wait at the café and she would meet him there and show him around more or something. They could watch the music together at least. Wouldn't he like that?

There was something undeniably good in Vesna's smile. She seemed to have a way—though they were strangers—of making one feel on the inside of a conspiracy, and that everyone else was kept out.

But the conspiratorial circle seemed considerably widened as Sander watched her emerge from the crowd with a woman who could have been her sister. At that moment his cell phone rang and he silenced it without looking.

It was just past dusk in a rich suburb of Toronto. In an empty two-story house with all the lights on, various windows showed glimpses of the young man moving calmly from room to room, upstairs and downstairs. The idling car honked on the street outside, waiting for him. He filled a backpack with CDs, toiletries, a t-shirt and a sweater, a notebook with edges of photos sticking out. The house was quiet and the silence crept like an invisible gas, low along the baseboards. After grabbing an item from each room he hit the light switch on the way out. He took the little voice recording device and a few twenties from his father's chest of drawers and left the master bedroom without pausing. He wanted to be prepared for whatever the night and beyond might hold. In the front room downstairs, he took a bottle of something strong from the cabinet on his way out. "Dawdling David at last," his friend said when he stepped into the car. "Everyone's already at the club."

"Everyone can wait forever," said David, affecting bravado, looking straight ahead and lighting a cigarette. He hunched his shoulders and kept his arms close to his sides as they began to drive away. "It's freezing in here," he said irritably, like it

was a nagging problem he thought long ago solved. He looked out the window at steam rising off the roofs of houses. "I have a plan for us afterwards."

The student had pulled Dragica away from her mother and some friends. Holding her hand, she led her through the crowd toward the Gradska Kavana. From a distance Dragica saw a man sitting alone at table, his head slightly bowed, completely unengaged with the liveliness all around him. She thought she'd never seen anything so solitary as him just sitting there. The girl brought her closer and when he looked up Dragica could see the man had a kind face. His eyes became big and he rose from the table and made two awkward steps, saying, "I didn't know… she was going to…" He gestured at Vesna with a crooked finger before letting his hand drop. Dragica realized then he was the same man as the one from the vision days earlier. She faltered as she was about to speak, instead turning to the student, looking at the schemer suspiciously, telling her to run and tell her mother that she might be a while.

In English, she asked him if he was in fact the Canadian she had known once. "I think I saw you walking the other day." The music was so loud that her words were barely audible to him. She opened her eyes wide to him and he laughed. He walked forward and raised his arms a little. Dragica reluctantly stepped in between them and let them hold her. She liked his smell, a freshness she associated with manliness. People were beginning to dance in giant circling lines behind them, a snake uncoiling. They straightened out of the embrace and she asked him what he was doing back in Croatia.

"I was actually in Sarajevo on business, and thought I would come find you."

"Oh," she said, trying to hide her unease.

"The name of your city has been kicking around in the back of my head ever since…" His voice trailed off. She didn't quite understand what he meant—was it a figure of speech unfamiliar to her? The music and crowd made it hard to capture everything. In this moment she reluctantly said farewell to the ghost of him, a vague curiosity, that notion of an old spirit reviving an exact past. And it was unsettling, incomprehensible, that this man had thought to seek her out.

"It's, well, such a surprise to see you. You haven't grown much older-looking," she said.

"You neither," he interjected, laughing again. "You haven't changed."

The absurdity and boldness of the statement struck her. She had in fact changed, irreversibly. That other person he presumed to know was a mere fraction of her self. "Maybe we can go somewhere quieter," she said, "so we can hear."

They found themselves walking along the river under the light of the moon which was nearly full. A cluster of teenagers was drinking on the bank opposite, and a young couple lay on top of each other beneath a tree further down.

"Do you have a family?" she asked.

"A son," he said.

"But you're not married?"

"I was. Are you?"

She wasn't sure which answer would be the most honest, which the best, and if those were the same thing. "I was. I mean, I once thought he was gone for good,

but he lives here, in town, on Jelačić." She knew he couldn't possibly know street names.

"My wife had an aneurism and died quite suddenly."

"I'm sorry," she said, wondering if it was recent. "How terrible."

"No, I'm sorry." He was shaking his head in disbelief. "I don't want to impose, don't even know what I'm doing here."

She grabbed his hand but then felt disingenuous, quickly dropping it. "How long will you stay?"

"Well, that depends. On things." He looked at her but she was focusing on something in the distance. They caught up on the generalities of life for the next few minutes as they walked. She had never been to Sarajevo so he told her about visiting the Tunnel of Hope, the city's only link to the outside world when it was under siege for three years in the nineties. He said that to get to it you had to go down into the basement of a house, that the original tunnel's 800 metres was dug entirely with a pick and a shovel. He mentioned the assassination museum, precisely at the spot where Franz Ferdinand was shot. How he had stood for a long time in front of the storyboards, pictures, and artifacts in front of him, the gun and the killer who pulled the trigger. How the pants that the man—a boy really, no older than his own son—wore that day were encased in glass right in front of him.

At her suggestion, they started walking back the way they came. "And what about your son?" she asked. "Don't you worry about him?"

"He's a man now—what about him? Listen, I've been thinking about you so much the last week. Too much, probably. That summer on the coast." He kept

slowing down and turning toward her, almost stopping. She was hoping to keep walking, looking straight ahead. "I want to reinvent myself." He seemed to be concentrating hard on the words.

"Such high expectations!" she said, trying to lighten the conversation. "I really don't think that people invent themselves. Moments do, conflicts and catastrophes do. Other people do." She wondered how he thought he could have control over such things. The novelty of their reunion had begun to wear off. It was difficult to reconcile the direction of their words with the almost total lack of history they had.

"The diplomat in me might agree," he said. He stopped walking, clasping her elbow, but she kept moving and he had no choice but to keep up. When they were back at the square, fireworks were going off above them. He invited her to his hotel. He'd bought some wine that afternoon and they could drink it. She needed to get back though. And she couldn't very well bring Sander to her family and try to explain, she wasn't sure she wanted to. "They're expecting me. I don't know what to say. Another time."

He began to raise his hands, as if to embrace or run them along her cheeks, but instead stretched his arms above his head and made an exaggerated yawn. "Come to me tomorrow, will you?"

"Yes," she said. "It's a good idea." They agreed on a time, both smiled, and when they hugged she practically bounced off of him, and then hurried into the crowd.

The next day there was no knock on his hotel room door at the arranged time in the early afternoon. Two hours had passed. When he called she answered and was very brief, sounding formal, telling him something had come up. She had to look after her mother and it was a bad time, but she hoped he was having a nice stay so far. She said it was a shame that he must have to leave soon. He tried sounding natural, saying, "Yes, we'll have to squeeze in a visit before then."

Dropping his cell phone onto the bed, following it with his body, Sander laid himself open to agony tempered by drink. There were three litres of homemade wine, half gone by early evening. Everything was confused. The room was starting to fade in and out. He saw his wife's face. He saw Dragica. He wasn't one to go looking for punishment, but thinking about his wife he began to feel a sliver of guilt. She had moved out of the world never suspecting he had ever strayed from her. In the bathroom he stripped naked and splashed his face, saying aloud, "Grief is a currency I refuse to deal in." He laughed at this, then caught his toe on the doorframe, howling. He grimaced and hopped back to the bed. A sleight-of-hand was always at work in a backroom somewhere: even the most natural, easiest bonds of intimacy would dissolve when one wasn't looking, and there would be no proof, never, that they truly existed in the first place. It was stupid, dangerous, to go looking for them. He slept facedown on the hotel room carpet.

The next morning, still drunk, toe throbbing, he heaved himself up and made it to the small table in the corner of the room. His whole being was leaning on the table. His forehead rested on his forearm and his heart was beating through his forehead and rocking the arm so that the table quivered slightly. His heart was

running dry, sputtering. He thought he might die, but in the next moment there was a knocking and it wasn't his heart. He limped over and peered through the peephole. When he opened the door, Vesna walked past him and sat on the edge of the bed. She shrugged happily when he stood staring at her. "I just asked for the foreigner's room."

At noon they were at the front edge of the abandoned property, one lot over from Vesna's house. It was raining again, and cold. Sander had looked the old man in the eyes and shaken his hand. Minutes later he was on the phone, moving money around so that he could get at it with ease—he knew bankers everywhere. Twin curtains of emptiness and inconsequentiality were slowly being drawn over everything Sander saw, spoke, heard. Yet, just looking at the property, he was already attached somehow to the wild-looking field and its empty little house. They stood at the front edge of the land, near the road, Vesna between the men, translating back and forth. Sander wanted to know whether they had flails to clear fields in the region yet, the big chains that would circle through the soil and trigger anything still there, even the plastic-shell mines that many handheld metal detectors would miss. The UN teams used them. They also used special dogs. Vesna said that they had neither, too expensive. But they did have a handheld left temporarily at the property, part of some old equipment paid for by a philanthropic American couple through the adopt-a-minefield program. Vesna's father began to angrily emphasize that both lots had been checked thoroughly and nothing had been found. The rain was lifting a bit. There was a yellow sign down the road. It had a red skull and crossbones on it and said NE PRILAZITE. Vesna's father handed Sander the keys to the old house.

It was a perfectly square structure consisting of a main room and two empty bedrooms on one side. At one end of the room there was a couch and the other boasted a functioning oven, a rusty sink, and orange-painted cupboards with one door missing to reveal three pots stacked inside each other, a packet of coffee, and a container of flour. There was an outhouse a few paces away, directly behind the cabin.

Every redeeming particle of drunkenness worn off by then, Sander became immensely hung over. He dropped his duffel bag on the concrete in the middle of the room. Then he collapsed onto the couch and curtains of dust rose up on either side of him. The reckless prospect of the land was an unexpected gift, a quiet exuberance welling up somewhere inside him. He sent a text message to his son. THINKING OF YOU. LIVING HERE LIKE A KING AMONG MEN. OUR EMPIRE IS EVER EXPANDING. SEE YOU SOON. Within minutes a response arrived, the phone playing its wistful little Chopin tune, pulling Sander out of his semi-conscious state on the couch. WHERE ON EARTH IS MY FATHER. DID HE FIND WHAT HE WAS LOOKING FOR? YOUR LOWLY SERVANT, PRINCE DAVID.

Her mother gave her the message. Krešo had some important news and could she also pick up some fruit on her way to him. Dragica bought pears and apples at the market and hurried over on her bicycle, nervous. She thought he might have something real taking place, maybe he had finally devised his escape from the town, accepting a job offer from a connection in some distant European city. If this was the case she would be furious—it wasn't jealousy, she just didn't want him gone. Maybe it was the Sander thing had gotten to her—he was apparently still around town—but

she just wouldn't be left behind. She was pedaling so hard that she was nearly out of breath.

At the apartment he had her sit down while he went into the kitchen. "I've been working on this for awhile," he called out. One at a time, he brought out four bowls of fruit and placed them on the table. Bananas, oranges, and the apples and pears. "Pick one, Dragica baby," he said.

"Come on, what the fuck was so important?" She wanted to break something, throw the bowls out the window.

"Just pick one and you'll see," he said, with his arms crossed, supressing a grin. She shook her head and tapped the bowl of oranges. He picked up four of them, readied himself, and began tossing them up, rotating them into the air, fast enough that there was a slight blur of orange motion around his head. He kept going, bringing one leg up from the knee to rebound an orange that looked to be dropping to the floor, and it fit right back into its place in the arc. Moments later he pivoted on a toe and spun a full circle without interrupting the rhythm. He could make the fruit go so high it appeared to skim the ceiling, or keep it low, right in front of his eyes. After a minute he caught them all and stopped, beaming. "Which type next? I can do any fruit, I can even mix."

She wondered how many hours he had practiced, and began to realize there might be no news at all. She squeezed out her words slowly. "What did you want to tell me so urgently?"

"I've taught myself to juggle," he said, affecting confusion.

She threw up her arms and headed for the door.

"Wait, my bug!" he called after her, but she didn't stop. In the stairwell he yelled, "I'll keep an eye on that guy, that fucker if you want, won't let him near you." When she turned and looked up the stairs, she saw a flicker of the old Krešo in his face, for once drained of all posturing.

The next few days had their own logic, an internal rhythm that Sander didn't conceive of or combat. There were the mornings laid to waste, waking just before noon, shivering on the couch the first time, wonderfully weighed down by comforters from Vesna after that. He called home every day but David didn't pick up and his cell was unreachable. Early afternoons Sander would walk to town for food, supplies. He also found a prod, trowel, and pair of helmets with visors. Mid-afternoons he would return for coffee at his new neighbours' place. He and Vesna's father conversed mostly by gestures and short words, and Sander lazily picked up more Croatian phrases. The man winked at him now and then, as if they were in on something together. They played rummy twice. When Vesna arrived after school, she and Sander would don their helmets and prepare for the field. He carried the metal-detector and she followed with the prod and trowel. At first he told her that her accompanying him was pointless and dangerous. But she had insisted on walking the field with him and her father didn't seem to mind. After the first time they stopped wearing the heavy helmets.

Later in the week they had already covered two-thirds of his parcel of land. They were well behind the tiny house, making ground on the river. The hum of the detector often wavered into its high-pitched beeping as they paced across width-wise,

single file from the last neon-pink flag they'd planted the day before. There were false alarms now and then, part of an old wheel, some nails, any bit of metal in the ground would set it off. It was nearly six o'clock and the sun was setting. Sander was concentrating on the hum, guiding the rod in a small swath and then back before each step.

"I need one of your cigarettes when we're done," she said.

A slight wind picked up and Sander felt pleasant, pausing to look at the flat plains of Slavonia all around them. The rod kept humming, as if it was the current that powered the remaining light in the sky as long as it could.

"Is your son good-looking?" she asked. A response didn't seem to be coming. "Sander."

He hadn't thought how close in age she was to David. "He is, I suppose. A handsome man already—still a boy sometimes, though."

"Will you have another one day?"

"Child? No." He chuckled at the odd questions she needed answered. "No more."

"I will have several when I am ready. Boys first, and after them maybe a girl. A girl I only want if she could have real talent as a ballerina."

This made him laugh too. "Was your mother beautiful?" he said. Then, more softly: "I bet she was."

"I don't remember but everyone says yes, she was. There are a few pictures."

They kept going, doubling back over the next line up. When the wind wasn't in their ears, all that could be heard was the detector and the sound of their legs

brushing through the overgrown grass—it was waist-high and higher in some places. Now and then Vesna gently bumped into him, barely, as if she hadn't been watching.

He looked forward to their quiet tours of duty, felt an unasked for peace when in the field with her at his back. He was already preparing himself for the inevitability of reaching the river, which made a natural property line. He would have to render an excuse as to why they ought to start over again, that they ought to be certain. It needed to be safe and clear.

That night he was sitting on the couch reading a Croatian phrasebook by candlelight, making sure his note to Dragica was competent if not flawless. It explained that he was still around, and asked if she might visit him. He would send it to school with Vesna in the morning after getting her to correct it.

A key turned in the door and Vesna walked in, veering a bit to one side, holding a guitar and a large plastic water bottle of red wine. "The old Serb from before hid keys all over the place out there," she said by way of explanation.

"You shouldn't be on the property in the dark," he said. "It's not safe. I thought you were an intruder."

"I am an intruder. And if it's not safe then I'll stay here," she said, plopping down beside him. "Until morning."

"You're drunk," he said. She passed him the wine and began strumming the guitar softly, momentarily shy again. She looked at him then and he saw that she was lucid.

"My father began celebrating with your money, so I took one of the party favours." She nodded at the wine. "I'm an intruder and a thief." She sang a

mournful love ballad, her guitar playing smoother than her voice. Both sat staring straight ahead at the empty room, as if lulled. Sander tested the wine and it was good.

They drank for some time and she said how thankful she and her father were that he'd come along. It was a formal thing to say and silence followed it. "I brought a picture of my mother," she said.

"I want to see it," Sander said in her tongue, feeling the wine a bit, wanting to impress her. He didn't realize that the particular phrasing had carnal connotations in the language. Vesna laughed, producing the small rounded photograph from her pocket and handing it to him. It was old and taken in partial shadow, but he saw that her mother was attractive, yet didn't possess the eyes of Vesna, nor whatever else made her so striking. The candle had wasted down to no higher than their toes. The guitar was on the floor. Vesna's hand was on Sander's chest, dragging her fingertips across it, and he haltingly lifted them to his lips.

"We should lie down together," she said. "If you like, I mean."

"I don't think it's an idea, Vesna," he said, straightening, trying to restrain the happiness the moment delivered. "I'd like to, of course. I would."

They both saw then that they could have whatever they wanted from each other. She took off her shirt, revealing a long stomach, large breasts and large nipples. He took off his, most of the hair on his chest gone grey. She stood up then and yanked his arm so that he rose up beside her. She was tall, almost his height. "I think we should pledge," she said, looking at him fully.

"What?" He laughed, but she kept his gaze where it was.

"A pledge, like to a leader, or a country." She pulled his hand to her left breast, flattening it so that it was wider, and he felt the beating like tiny wings behind the flesh. She took a breath. "No matter how old or full of garbage or battered this Vesna-space becomes, it will keep a small place in it for Sander Torbensson."

He spread out her thin fingers left-centre on his chest and inhaled. "No matter how old or full of garbage or battered this Sander-space becomes, it will keep a small place in it for Vesna Radić."

She led him back down to the couch. His lips parted the hair on her forehead, then kissed her nose, each of her eyes. The wind outside was rattling loose shingles on the roof, so that he looked upwards as they tossed off the rest of their clothes. He was still in a state of semi-belief at the turn of events, but in the same moment he was thrilled by a tingle of life re-forming itself, a feeling that was nothing short of hope. She made him slow down at one point, saying she wanted to enjoy this. She also wanted his hand gently on the back of her neck. And again her eyes looked at him, continually now, in that knowing way, like the very thing of him was uncovered with ease. She slid the cushions onto the floor and, starting over, he returned to her there.

Sander had given her a note to deliver and on the way to school Vesna—wanting him, to herself, at least for now—briefly considered tearing the note to tiny pieces and letting the wind spread it in all directions, but she didn't. She knew what it said, had read it several times, knew it implored Dragica to meet with Sander again, as she handed it to the teacher that afternoon.

There had been talk of the foreigner in town, how he had taken land off of old Radić's hands. Dragica's mother was angry that a foreigner picked up where a Serb had left off on property that had been Croatian all along. Dragica could understand the kind of man that would abandon his own life, but what kind left a son in the lurch she couldn't imagine. At any rate, she wanted to salvage something from her visitor, this Sander, something for herself.

On a whim she stopped at a clothing store she was riding past on the city's main street. She wanted some kind of gesture, and picked out a sweater for him, half-price on the sale rack, but it was all she could realistically spare. It seemed silly, the sweater was striped and had fashionable patterns and nonsense English phrases partially rubbed out in a fashionable way. It was the kind her students wore, but she thought it would fit Sander's long torso and he might like it, after all. With the sweater tucked into her satchel, she road the stretch on her bicycle that would take her to the road past the edge of town.

On the way past one of the last city houses, two German Shepherds lunged at her from behind a fence, barking with deafening ferocity. She swerved and her foot slipped and she almost fell off the bike, scraping her ankle on a pedal. She had always feared dogs, and it was a long moment before she realized they were in fact chained and unable to reach her. There was no blood. Recovering, she rode on while they continued barking as if they were tearing their own throats out.

It was the first warm and sunny day in the entire week, and probably one of the last before winter. Dragica carefully pedaled on the gravel, yet felt more and more urgency to speed up and get to Sander the closer she got. The last few days, for

some reason, she didn't feel like she was merely tolerating her existence. No, something was different, and if nothing else she wanted to tell this stranger her vague truth, that trying to reinvent oneself, though futile, must still mean something. Her period was late and she thought she might already be pregnant.

Vesna didn't come home that afternoon, but Sander wasn't worried, though he craved the very sight of her. He was out back by himself, carefully going over the last strip on the riverbank. He paused and wiped sweat off of his forehead with his wrist. He turned the detector off for a minute, and without its hum he could only hear the river. He looked at the plum trees, all of them heavy with unpicked fruit, some of it rotten. Maybe he could bring David over and they could really clean the place up. The boy still hadn't responded to any calls or messages, and Sander realized for the first time that he wanted his son nearby more than anything.

Dragica spotted him from the road and walked her bicycle toward the river along the fence on the adjacent Radić property. When she was almost at the water and fifty yards to the side of him, she called his name, fondly. Sander was on his belly with the trowel, scraping at a rock beneath some loosened dirt. Looking up, he saw that it was her. He swallowed, and smiled easily. He pushed up off the ground with a certain grace, like a man recently restored, and dusted his shirt with his palms. He then stepped sideways and walked toward her on the uncorrupted path, ground he had secured inch by inch.